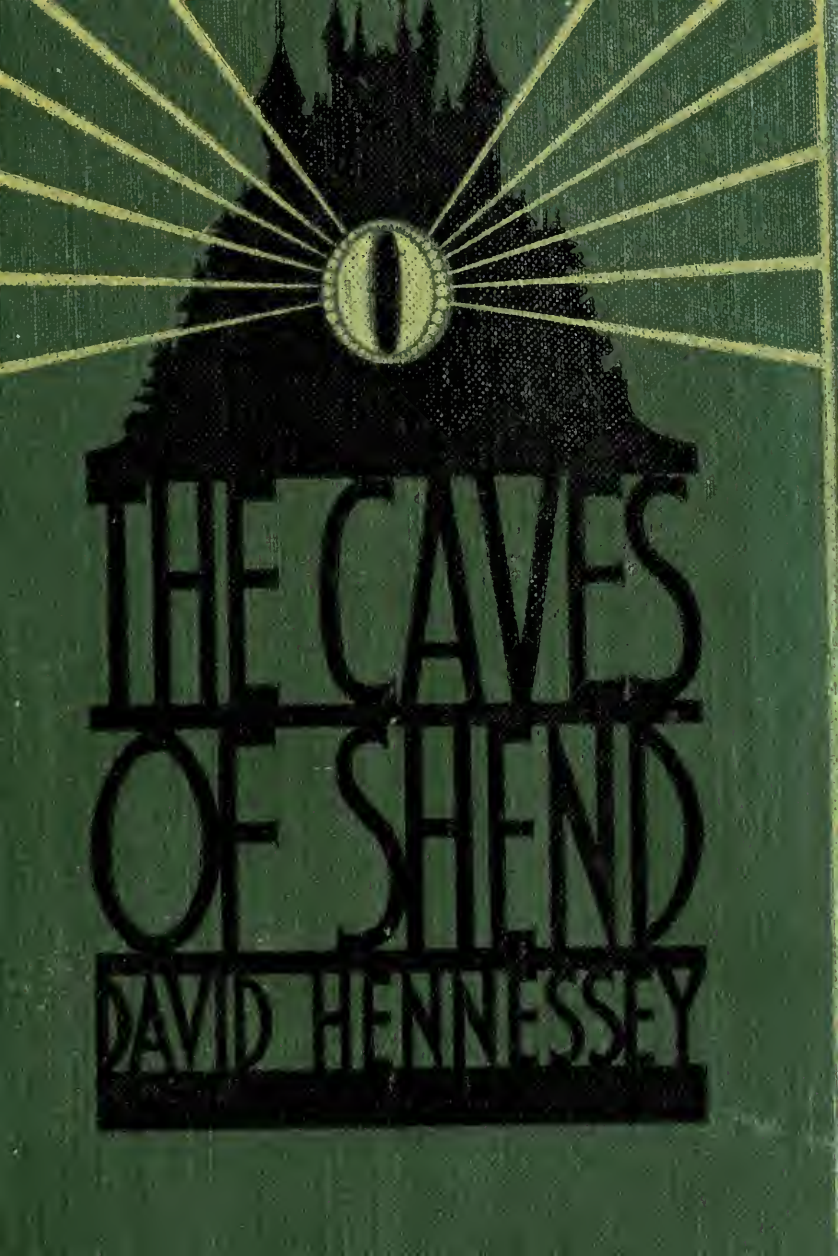
THE CAVES
OF SHEND
DAVID HENNESSEY

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THE CAVES OF SHEND

THE CAVES OF SHEND

BY

DAVID HENNESSEY

AUTHOR OF

"THE OUTLAW," "A TAIL OF GOLD," "THE BUSH TRACK,"
"WYNNUM," "THE DIS-HONOURABLE," ETC.

"The famous name of knighthood foully shend."—SPENCER.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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CHAPTER I

THE DISCOVERY

I HAD returned on a visit to Australia from England after an absence of about forty years. As I had come on business, and my visit was likely to be brief, I was staying at the big hotel in Castlereagh Street, when one morning I received an urgent invitation from an old friend I had well-nigh forgotten named Dr Strong, a wealthy bachelor who was living in the south-eastern suburbs of Sydney. So, having a few days to spare before the sailing of the mail steamer by which I was returning, I availed myself of his hospitality and the opportunity to repair an old Australian friendship.

I should mention that the newspapers of the previous day had given prominence to a weird discovery which had made something of a sensation in the suburb referred to. Some navvies working on a new sewerage scheme, when blasting their way through limestone at a considerable depth, had broken into a vault or cave under the foundations of an old ruined mansion, and there had discovered two chained skeletons and something like five thousand pounds in old gold coinage. The supposition was that the skeletons were those of convicts and the gold a hoard of stolen treasure connected with some unsolved criminal mystery of the early days of the colony.

I found that my friend was living only about a mile distant from the vicinity of the gruesome discovery.

On my arrival, when lunch was over and we had

settled down for a smoke and yarn in his comfortable library, he startled me by asking: "Did you know anything of a Mrs Dalbert when you lived in Sydney?"

"Not that I can remember," I replied.

We smoked in silence for a couple of minutes as I tried to recall the name.

"What do you think of this discovery of skeletons and gold in the caves under the ruins of 'The House of Shend'?" was the next question the doctor asked me.

"'The House of Shend,'" I repeated, thoroughly perplexed. "Do you refer to the recent underground discovery near here? I understood from the papers that before the old place was burnt down, some forty or fifty years ago, it was known as 'Storm-Cliff Towers.'"

"Yes," he said, "one of the Ballantynes so named it; but it was also known as 'The House of Shend,' and some called it 'The Black Mansion.' If you were living in Sydney at the time of the trial of Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert you must have heard about it. And to think," he continued, after a pause, "that after all these years their skeletons have been found."

"I do not recall it," I said, "but it may have happened while I was away in Noumea. I remember reading of the big fire at 'The Towers,' but it is so long ago that for men who like myself are busy with the present, it's easy to forget."

"Ah," said the doctor, tapping his finger-nails upon the carving of the arm of his easy-chair as though playing upon an instrument, "the hand of change rattles over the keyboard to quicker music here where the warm fresh winds of the Pacific blow than in the old cold lands of Europe. 'Tis the restless spirit of youth, maybe, which throbs in this virgin country; but the fact remains that things quickly grow old here and people soon forget."

"I'm not surprised at that," I answered. "The short time of my re-visit to Australia has been like a dream. The changes are so remarkable that I am inclined to say to myself: 'There were giants in those days.' But what about this house of many names, from under the ruins of which this tragedy has been unearthed?"

The doctor smoked for fully a minute before he answered me.

"You're an author," he said at last, "and the story will interest you; but it calls up painful memories to me, and I have no intention myself of making it public or giving the newspapers a narrative which they would, no doubt, like to print. It is very strange, but it seems as though I was the only one left who could name these two skeletons and suggest how the gold and silver came there and to whom it originally belonged."

"I see that the Government has taken possession of the money, pending the discovery of a better owner for it," I remarked.

"There is no one to claim it," said the doctor; "and so far as I am concerned the tragedy will go into the limbo of other mysterious colonial crimes."

"Then there was a crime connected with it?"

"Not one, but many crimes, extending over probably half a century or more. A man that I knew many years ago, one of the Dorsets, found out that the building of that great house by Hugh Ballantyne, who was an old emancipist, over a series of natural caves, was largely a blind to hoodwink the authorities. You see there were a number of convicts and emancipists in league together, for plunder and robbery, and Ballantyne was only the head so far as the erection of the house was concerned, which was built from the plans of an assigned servant of his, a clever architect who had been transported for forgery. No doubt the criminal geniuses of those days occasionally did things

in a big way, but to erect a place like 'The Towers' over the biggest resort of convict thieves in Australia was a master-stroke."

"But how could such a thing be done unknown to the Government?" I interjected.

"Ah, it's difficult for us to conceive the state of things which obtained in the early years of last century," replied the doctor. "I have, of course, no personal knowledge of what I refer to; but I have heard it from the lips of those who had. The condition of things was unique. The Government and the whole community were largely dependent for the management of the business of the Colony upon convicts with good conduct tickets. Military men are not usually given to accountancy, and outside the convict element there were comparatively few educated men available for clerkships. Mind you, many of these convicts became splendid citizens—some of the wealthiest merchants of those days, men who drove their carriages, were emancipists; but among these educated convicts were not a few thoroughly unprincipled men, and it was this state of affairs which made the existence of the 'Circular Letter' possible. This was a powerful secret society of convicts which, in addition to other undertakings, levied blackmail, planned robberies, received stolen goods, altered prisoners' sentences, and did multitudes of unlawful things under the very nose of authority."

"Do you mean to say that they kept a record of their ill-deeds?"

"Record! Why, the affair was run with all the astuteness and close attention to detail of an extensive business concern. You should see the entries in their private ledger known as 'The Padlocked Book'! At one time the 'Circular Letter' was possessed of large revenues and was the dread of every right thinking convict and emancipist in the Colony. It was smashed up at last, of course, and my personal recollection touches the period of its final extinction, which

culminated in the escape from Australia of the ring-leaders (afterward drowned at sea), leaving behind them, chained in that cave, two living persons whose skeletons have been recently exhumed."

"It is a strange story," I said.

"You'll say so when you read it." At which the kindly old doctor looked at me with evident interest and approval as he, to my surprise, continued as follows: "I don't aspire to authorship, and feel somewhat diffident in submitting my lucubrations to a popular scribbler like yourself; but some time ago I wrote out what I know of the strange story of these Caves of Shend, and, strange to say, this discovery has supplied me with the very *dénouement* I had been looking for."

"By the way," he continued, "you'll gather from the story why I never married, but don't commence to read it until you are homeward bound; it will wile away a few tedious hours on the steamer, and then, if you think it worth while, lick it into shape for publication. I've altered some of the names of people and places, but my name can stand; for although she's getting old now, she's living somewhere in England and may see it. Here's the manuscript," he said, taking a bulky parcel out of a drawer; "and now let's talk of something else."

. . . . . .

On first reading the story on the mail boat I thought portions of it improbable and far-fetched, but as I recalled the long-forgotten past, and afterward reviewed and re-examined certain facts of which I had personal knowledge, and referred to old files of bygone newspapers, I was compelled to accept as absolute truth many things which I had before doubted.

Dr Strong is now dead, but, as may be gathered from the narrative, he was strong in character as well as name, and worthy of a better fate than to have lived and died a bachelor.

CHAPTER II

THE MASTER-STROKE

I AM a doctor of medicine, John Strong by name, and I write this story, in the year 18—, less with the thought of publication than for the comfort of mind which such occupation may chance to bring me. She whom I have loved more than other women has left Australia for ever. I am thankful to say under happy circumstances for her, but otherwise for me.

I propose to tell the story, which has enveloped so many of us in its strange happenings, from the beginning, just as it occurred, not anticipating what came to my knowledge afterward, but in simple language I desire to chronicle, so far as I have been able to obtain particulars from others as well as of my own knowledge, one of the strangest and saddest stories of early Australian days.

When I first saw the place, "The Black Mansion" had been erected for several years. It stood overlooking the sea, upon the brow of a low hill, in about fifty acres of grounds, the house being surrounded on all sides, save the east, by stately fir and pine trees.

It was generally known that the mansion had been planned by Isaac Shend, a convict architect, and was built for Hugh Ballantyne, under convict superintendence, by convict labour; but the place was romantic and beautiful enough to have satisfied the eye of a poet, or musician, or painter.

I have heard that Isaac Shend was a man of rare

genius in his profession, but he was sent out, alas! when a young man for careless penmanship, which involved someone else's name. I never, by the way, met with anyone of the same strange surname. As an educated man, I should think he must have known that his name was derived from a Saxon word which means to disgrace or put to shame; but goodness knows, use is second nature and he may not have troubled himself about it, for it's doubtful whether half the people possessed of curious surnames have any idea of what they really mean.

That is one disadvantage of English. In other languages such names would mostly explain themselves, but hundreds of English surnames might be mentioned which possess the same disadvantage.

However, Isaac Shend planned the house on broad lines and built it massively of stone, with towers and battlements, and graceful pinnacles, and curious carvings, and broad terraces, in imitation of the stately homes of other lands. Yet it was a doomed, blood-tainted mansion from the time of its first erection; although great men now and again sat at its hospitable table, and a few notable episodes of early colonial history were associated with the place.

As I remember it, 'twas much weather-beaten by southerly gales, and looked more ancient than it was. It stood in park-like grounds upon a promontory which overlooked the Pacific Ocean a few miles south of Sydney.

The position of the place was singular, and worthy of note, and admirably suited for its purpose. To the north, upon a hill-side, was a small cemetery; in front there stretched a windswept common, and behind it was the sea. Not a pacific sea, however, although part of the Pacific Ocean, for owing to a dangerous current which swept round this part of the coast, 'twas a sea of foam-flecked billows which surged and thundered against rugged cliffs and seaweed-covered rocks. But in the northern portion of the

grounds was a small deep-water bay or inlet which afforded safe anchorage for small craft; here a small schooner-rigged yacht belonging to the house might occasionally have been seen lying at anchor.

The mansion was no sooner erected when its owner, Hugh Ballantyne, without entering into possession, suddenly died, leaving the great house behind him, unnamed; and, singular to relate, the night he died, with the place finished and furnished complete, the architect locked himself in a room of the North Tower and committed suicide by hanging, and, owing to his master's death and funeral, hung there, a gruesome object, for nearly a week before being discovered. I shall not attempt now to explain this fearful tragedy, but there was an explanation. I may say, however, that one consequence of the deaths of the owner and architect together was that certain secrets of construction in the mansion passed from common knowledge.

For nearly two years after this the great house stood unoccupied, in charge of a caretaker, a distant relative of the Ballantynes, named Owen Skinner; for the next of kin, a brother of Hugh's, was out of Australia. It stood there, surrounded by dark trees, off the road of ordinary life as it were, a nameless house of suicide and mystery, fitting quarters for tragedy, or ghost, or murder. It seemed impossible, even for the passing stranger who knew nothing of its dark history, not to associate the place with baleful deeds. It was at this time that the house became known throughout the district as "The Black Mansion."

The next Ballantyne, after a very brief residence, died unmarried and left considerable property to a third brother named Raymond, also a bachelor fairly advanced in years, who, on taking tardy possession, named the big house "Storm-Cliff Towers."

Sydney expected this Ballantyne to marry, which eventually he did, and being a wealthy man he made "The Towers" for a few years an occasional resort of colonial politicians and other fashionable folk; but

his wife died childless, and leaving Owen Skinner in charge Raymond went off to India and Europe. He returned, after some years, greatly changed, lived a secluded life, became addicted, it was said, to drink and drugs, refused to see callers, and at last committed suicide by drowning himself off the cliffs.

During these years the ill repute of the place increased. A handsome widow cousin, reputed wealthy, had returned with Raymond from India, and colonial society gave him six months in which to marry her, then shrugged its shoulders and called at "Storm-Cliff Towers" no more.

The lawyers, who were Raymond Ballantyne's executors, did their best during the twelve months following his death to rehabilitate "The Towers" for an heiress, the daughter of a younger brother, who was to arrive from England. Some of the timber was thinned out, and the house and grounds generally renovated; but fresh paint did not restore the good reputation of the place. It remained, as it had been from the time of its first erection, the master-stroke of Shend—a beautiful black mansion; a place which seemed to offer unique opportunities for wrongdoing; a house which seemed to suggest and incite to crime; a house which confirmed the popular belief that where there are appropriate surroundings, in due time crime will come, as surely as does a bird at nightfall to its nest, or a child to its home, or love to the heart of a woman. But all this time certain convicts of the "Circular Letter," of which Hugh Ballantyne had been one, and of which Owen Skinner was another, knew that beneath the beautiful mansion, named "Storm-Cliff Towers" by Raymond Ballantyne, were the Caves of Shend.

Truly it was a grim inheritance to come to a young and beautiful English girl just out of her teens.

CHAPTER III

THE FIREPLACE MOVES

It was on the evening of June the 5th, 18—, that Miss Beatrice Ballantyne, in soft silk wrapper and slippers, sat rocking herself in an old-fashioned brocaded chair, in front of a wood and fir-cone fire, in a large and brilliantly lighted apartment of the mansion already referred to.

The china clock upon the mantelpiece was on the stroke of ten.

It was the evening of the day upon which she had, as heiress, entered upon residence at "The Towers." Moreover, it was her birthday. She was twenty-two.

What a day it had been! Only three mornings before she had landed with four servants from England, and stepped into a new world in the Southern hemisphere. How strange everything had seemed at first, yet how familiar. Sydney seemed to her like Brighton, removed bodily to the other side of the globe, only beautified with an amazing harbour.

How friendly everyone had been while she rested for two days at the big hotel, to consult her solicitor, and give her orders to the tradespeople. How she had been admired and congratulated, and what a number of people had called to leave cards, even before she had taken possession of her new residence. And now, in this grand, sombre, castle-looking place, which was all her own, she was at last at home, with old and new servants to wait upon her.

"Ah!" she whispered to a pet dog which lay beside her, blinking at the fire, "see what it is to be rich, Bobby; but I'm a bit frightened of this great house. I haven't seen half over it yet. I'll explore it properly to-morrow. I'm tired of everything to-night; even tired of being rich, and being an heiress."

There was a piece of bark crackling in the fire, and the bright blaze dulled occasionally, as a shower of tiny sparks was thrown off by a succession of miniature explosions. Beatrice drew her feet from off the polished fender, for a stray spark actually dropped upon her instep. Then she petted the dog, and listened to her maid bustling about in the adjoining room, preparatory to retiring for the night.

"'Tis strange," she whispered to the dog, "that Lucy and I should be sleeping in the end rooms of this great mansion by ourselves. That wretched coachman and his wife, and the cook, and housemaid are all in the south wing, with half a dozen doors between us; and the bells out of order too. However, Lucy is not a timid girl, thank goodness! and why should I fear the old place, or believe the foolish tales told about it."

The lady rocked herself to and fro, as one unconsciously does when indulging in retrospect. She looked at the pictures which came and went amid the glowing embers of the fir cones. Her thoughts were away on the eastern coast of England. It was springtime there, she thought, or rather, early summer—"the leafy month of June."

"So this is Australia; but how cold it is," she said, and rising, flung from a coal-scuttle a pile of the great fir cones on the now smouldering embers, which, quickly kindling into a blaze, cast added light over the large apartment.

It was luxuriantly furnished. A polished walnut bedstead, with silk hangings, stood near a bay-window with richly upholstered Ottoman seats in the recess. A thick square of velvet pile carpet covered the centre

of the floor, and old-fashioned chairs and sofas were scattered around, while at the far end of the room was a large wardrobe of walnut wood, with full-length mirrors in the panellings of the doors. Close by was the half-opened door leading to the dressing-room, where Miss Ballantyne's maid was to sleep.

The ceiling was inwrought with plaster castings, and a handsome cornice of similar work gave a finish to the walls of the apartment. It suggested at a glance that the house to which it belonged was of considerable dimensions, and the home of wealth.

After replenishing the fire, its cheery blaze tempted the mistress of "Storm-Cliff Towers" to sit down again, and lifting Bobby, who was begging hard for notice, she called her maid, gave her the dog, and dismissed her for the night. Then, with large, grey eyes gazing thoughtfully into the fire, she sat very still.

At twenty-two Beatrice was both matured and self-reliant, for she had early been thrown very much upon her own resources. Her parents had died when she was young, leaving her to the guardianship of an elderly Welsh gentleman, who satisfied his conscience by placing her at a high-class boarding-school, and carefully husbanding the resources of some landed property which she inherited in Wales.

The Ladies' College (as it was termed in the prospectus) was at Norwich, and it was here that many of the pleasantest episodes of Beatrice's early life had transpired. Her guardian died about the time she had attained her majority, since when she had travelled a good bit in the south of Europe with an aunt and two girl cousins; but suddenly her Uncle Raymond had died, or rather committed suicide by throwing himself off the cliffs behind the sea wall of "The Towers," and had left her sole heiress of his property. She was a rich woman, without kith or kin in Australia. She was confessedly possessed of great beauty and was well educated, and among the thoughts which passed through her mind as she again

lay back in the rocking-chair, was what she was going to do with herself and her beauty and wealth in that great sombre place; for her uncle's will had expressed a wish that she should marry and reside there. And then she began to think about her Uncle Raymond and the story of his reputed suicide—for his body was never found.

That was his picture, done in oils, over the fireplace. He seemed to be looking at her. She would remove it to-morrow and put an overmantel there.

Presently her attention was called to the fireplace and grate, which were of strange and costly workmanship, and the rich, thick rug upon which her rocking-chair rested. The rug was not long and narrow, as hearthrugs usually are, but was about six feet square, and under it was a curiously wrought tessellated flooring of terra-cotta; she noticed, too, that the centre carpet amply cleared the rug and ornamental tile-work.

Becoming more interested, she rose from her chair and stepped back upon the carpet to examine the hearth more closely.

A moment after, however, she might have been seen to start and then stare, open-eyed, at the fireplace and tessellated square and hearthrug and rocking-chair; for, to her horror, she observed them, slowly and noiselessly, but very perceptibly, sinking in one solid piece below the surface of the floor.

Her first impulse was to rush to the door and call for help; but Beatrice was of sterner stuff than many women of two-and-twenty are made of, and this extraordinary thing was taking place in her own house. She was half fascinated too by the strangeness of the thing, and scarcely retained power over either voice or muscles. The fireplace, with hearthrug and chair, sank lower and lower, and presently there grasped the edge of the tessellated tile-work, in full view of the glowing embers in the grate, the four fingers of a

hand, upon one of which there sparkled a jewelled ring.

They were fingers which, seen under such circumstances, were not likely to be forgotten.

The ring was an uncommon one, worn upon the second finger of the hand—the left one. It was a cat's-eye, set in a rim of gold, around which there sparkled in the firelight a circle of beautiful diamonds. The fingers were large and fat—white, too, and tapered.

Beatrice was fascinated and horrified; fat fingers were to her suggestive of violence. She felt herself about to scream—then tried to, but could not—and a moment afterward sank unconscious upon the floor.

CHAPTER IV

A HOUSE OF DREAMS

If it had been anyone else's mansion Beatrice would probably have given a full account of what had transpired to her maid; but after she had recovered the severe shock to her nerves, and speech was once more easy to her, she determined, for the present at any rate, to keep her own counsel.

No harm, she thought, had been intended to herself, for she had an indistinct recollection of being lifted off the floor and placed upon one of the sofas, where Lucy afterwards found her. The room was not disarranged; the fireplace was where it ought to be; the lights were still burning; and Lucy, on being called by her mistress, came in half awake and in a state of perplexity, which gave ample proof that she had not been previously disturbed.

The fire had died out, so Beatrice, making an excuse to Lucy, decided for that night to share her maid's room, which she did, after having seen that the door between the two apartments had been securely locked. For hours afterwards she lay listening for any noise in the adjoining room, oppressed by a painful feeling of apprehension.

Lucy slept soundly, as people do who have not come into the possession of a mystery, or anything else which proves more than they can properly take care of.

The dawn of day, however, found Beatrice asleep,

and when she awoke, bright sunlight was streaming into the room.

She felt at first inclined to treat the occurrence of the previous night as a strange dream, the outcome of excitement and novelty, and was on the point of telling it to Lucy, when the girl, who lived in friendly intercourse with her young mistress, and was much attached to her, broke an unusually long silence by saying that she had dreamt a very strange thing about their new residence.

If Lucy had watched Miss Ballantyne closely, she would have noticed her start and change colour.

"I'm not surprised at that," she answered slowly, "this strange old place might make the most prosaic person dream; but what was it, Lucy?"

"I don't like to tell you, Miss Beatrice."

"Don't be silly, girl! Whatever it was you dreamt, it was only a dream. I dreamt a strange thing myself last night, but I attach no importance to it. However, tell me your dream; but don't be long, for it will soon be breakfast-time, and I want to go out and explore among those splendid old trees and shrubberies I can see from the window, and get a sniff of the ocean. Whatever evil associations there may be about the house, it's a grand old place in daylight."

"Do you know whether this is the ground floor we are on?" asked Lucy abruptly.

"Of course it is," replied her mistress, but there was an anxious tremor in her voice. The question had startled her. "Why?"

"I dreamt last night there was a downstairs to the house," said Lucy; "and I thought I was upstairs, and someone called to us from the basement."

"Did you answer?"

"No, miss; but in the next room I saw a staircase, and I went down, for something seemed to compel me to. I expected to find myself in a kitchen or cellar, but, instead, I dreamt there was a large carpeted room, furnished like a library."

Beatrice felt her heart thumping against her side; but she only remarked, "It was a queer dream. I suppose that was the end of it?"

"No, miss," said Lucy in a hushed voice, as though she feared someone might be listening. "There was a sort of carpeted platform beneath the fireplace. Two candles were burning on a table, and a chair was on the platform."

"Well, what else?" asked Beatrice sharply, as the girl paused, her white face suggesting that some most unpleasant thing was to follow. "I suppose you dreamt, then, that you saw my dead uncle down there?"

"Don't be angry, Miss Beatrice," said the simple-hearted girl, who was evidently so agitated that she felt much inclined to cry. "I saw a big man lying upon the floor. His face was turned away from me, but one large, fat hand was resting upon his breast, and it had a queer ring upon one of the fingers. I could not take my eyes off it."

"What was it like?" asked Beatrice.

"I think it was one of those cat's-eyes we saw at Colombo; and it seemed to have something sparkling around it like diamonds."

"It was a strange dream," said Beatrice. "But put on your hat and come with me out into the grounds."

Lucy and her young mistress breathed more freely when they had passed through the big entrance hall and stood together outside, upon the broad drive in front of the house, where a man was sweeping.

It was truly a grand old place, such as Beatrice, with her English notions, had never expected to find in Australia. The main building was of one story only, built of a kind of grey stone, with a tower and turrets over the main entrance. At each end, the front of the house was flanked with a massive tower, the northern one overlooking a broad terrace that had been constructed upon the side of a hill, below which,

in the miniature valley, a shallow stream hurried on its brief course to the ocean. The undrawn blinds, and an open door leading on to the great stone veranda, showed that the servants were already astir, so that Beatrice, willing to be alone with her thoughts, sent Lucy in to give some orders about breakfast.

From the broad carriage drive, opposite the main entrance to the mansion, a short flight of stone steps led to a sloping lawn encircled by the spreading boughs of great fir trees, while near the ornamental terrace walls were two or three lofty pines, which reared their topmost branches until they could overlook the many roofs of "Storm-Cliff Towers," and see how the blue Pacific waters reached away to the far eastern horizon.

But Beatrice could only guess at what the pine trees saw, for the great house covered the whole of the rounded slope upon which it had been erected, and on either side of it was shut in by a thick growth of trees.

Passing down the slope past a large stone fountain, Beatrice reached an ornamental white fence which encircled this portion of the grounds. Even here, however, the trees found place for themselves, only opening out to make room for an avenue of firs whose embowered roof reached in unbroken lines right along the broad drive to the entrance gates of the grounds.

Beatrice had seen longer and finer avenues of trees in England, but there was something about the planting of these firs and pines which seemed to her suggestive of occult art. She noticed that the front of the house was completely encircled by them—their higher branches touching each other, and the fronds at the extremity of the long, naked boughs looked to her like hands clasped to form a circle, either for protection or enchantment.

And yet, with the morning sunlight glinting through the sombre branches, flecking the long-drawn avenue with patches of gold, and lighting up the massive

castellated stonework in front of the mansion, even Beatrice could not resist the cheery morning freshness which animated the whole scene. Birds darted to and fro on swift wings, while cooing wood-doves could be heard calling to each other among the branches.

"Probably," thought Beatrice, relaxing into a sombre mood, "the evil reputation of the place has been its safeguard. It is, of course, supposed to be haunted, and people hold it in such awesome repute that the very birds are safe from molestation."

Turning back to the house, she passed through an arched stone doorway which led to another broad stone veranda, under the windows of the apartment in which she had sat the previous night, and the big drawing-room on the northern side of the residence. Fronting this was another stone terrace adorned with huge vases at regular intervals, and, within the enclosure, a grassy lawn. The steep decline to the valley, already mentioned, was planted so thickly with fir trees that little could be seen except the gleaming waters of a distant waterfall which, tumbling over some stones, formed a picturesque bit of landscape.

The whole ocean front of the house, as far as the bay-window of the big dining-room, was covered in by a conservatory, but beyond, in this direction as well as others, were similar lines of sombre trees; here, however, not quite so closely planted, so that glimpses of a little bay and the broad ocean could here and there be obtained. The southern end of the house was flanked with stabling and coach-houses, such as might have belonged to a baronial castle of the olden time.

"Well, this is a queer place!" ejaculated Beatrice at last, and she sighed as she said it, for she felt that its possession by her was the turning over of a leaf in her history which could never be turned back.

Alas, that life should be made up so much of what people call "happenings," and so little of one's

own planning and choosing. Beatrice, on this particular morning, wished, from her heart, that another besides herself had been her uncle's heiress. But the die was cast, and there was no turning back now; so, being a well-to-do young woman, she decided upon the best thing which she well could do under the circumstances, which was to examine the inside of the mansion in company with her maid and the coachman, with special regard to the haunted chamber, and then to drive into town and tell the whole of what had happened, or, what she imagined had happened, to her lawyer.

CHAPTER V

THE HOME-SICKNESS

THE further investigations which Beatrice made that morning, in company with her maid and coachman, were not at all satisfactory. She was upset and nervous, and everything seemed to be at cross-purposes. The fact was, that the establishment generally was suffering from a complaint common to newly arrived English people in Australia. Miss Ballantyne and her English servants were only four days off the steamer, and every one of them was home-sick.

The coachman's wife, who was also laundress to the household, had been crying in her laundry for quite half an hour. She felt "lonesome and miserable," she said, at the thought that she was all them miles from dear old England. She knew she would never see Bristol any more, nor her sister Barbara, nor her brother Ben as lived in sight of the Wrekin in Shropshire. She would not have let her William come out to such an upside-down, vile country, let alone have come with him, if Mrs Brotherton, the mistress's aunt, had not bothered her into it. Why could not Miss Ballantyne have brought her maid, and got other servants in Australia, without bringing decent English people right away from all belonging to them?

William was about to reply, with as much asperity as was possible to his placid nature, when he heard his name called by the cook, and, glad to get away,

he hurried down the passage which led from the comfortable laundry into the kitchen, which was somewhat inconveniently situated at the south end of the house.

It was Polly Cornstalk, the cook, a plump, rosy-cheeked Tasmanian woman, that had called him. She had been engaged the previous day by Miss Ballantyne at a Sydney registry office, and was as much Australian as the rest of the household were English. She was a stout, little woman, although her name was Cornstalk, and she squared around upon the big coachman when he hove in sight as though about to give him a bit of her mind, for she was under the impression that his wife's tears had resulted from her husband's bad treatment of her.

"Billy Hardbake," she said, "that Ayrshire cow has just lifted the rail and walked into the stable to say good morning to the carriage horses."

"Good heaven!" shouted William, turning to rush out, "she'll gore them or get kicked."

"No, she won't," said Polly, "I put her out before I told you; but look here, Billy, don't you think that a big man like you ought to be kicked for abusing his wife?"

"It's a lie," said William bluntly.

"Oh yes, of course it is," said Polly, with a sneer, "and I didn't hear her crying just now, the poor thing. You Englishmen are all alike, and I wouldn't marry one of you if you were hanging in diamonds; but do get out of the kitchen and let me get the mistress's breakfast. You had better go back and bully your wife." With this last malicious fling she slammed the kitchen door in his face.

William felt himself to be a much ill-used and misunderstood man, but there was no help for it, and he went out sulkily to his work in the coach-house and stables. What could one man do who had to dance attendance on four women? He'd give Miss Ballantyne a month's notice and take Sarah back to England —and he probably would have done so if Beatrice

Ballantyne had been a man; but he did nothing of the sort, for she was a woman.

After the household had breakfasted, William was summoned by his mistress to bring a screw-driver and assist Lucy and Kate, the housemaid, in making a few changes in the arrangement of the furniture. Several rooms were pretty closely scrutinised and a few slight alterations made, until at last they reached the chamber where Beatrice had met with her most alarming adventure of the previous night.

"Measure the mantelpiece across," said the young lady to William. "I want to buy a walnut overmantel to match the rest of the furniture."

She shuddered when she saw him stand fair upon the hearth, and involuntarily stepped farther back toward where Lucy and the housemaid watched the proceedings. Suppose the fireplace should give way under his weight, and there should be a repetition of the startling scene of the previous evening?

William, however, was thinking of his own grievances, and it never occurred to him that his young mistress was a bit strange and flurried in her remarks and general demeanour.

"Take up the hearthrug, William," she said.

The coachman quietly obeyed, wondering to himself the while what his wife and the cook might just then be saying about him.

"What a fine piece of tessellated tile-work this is," she said, after contemplating it for fully a minute. "Don't go away, Lucy! . . . and you stop, too, Kate," she called out as the girls, thinking they were not further wanted, were moving into the next room.

"Can I be doing anything, miss?" asked Kate.

"Yes—no——" said Beatrice, a bit confused. "You had better remain, I may want you."

She was scrutinising the tessellated square, on which William still stood, with the keenest attention. Only for Lucy's having told her about her dream, she would have made him stamp upon it to see if it was firm or

sounded hollow. There was a line all around, where a different coloured tile formed a kind of border; but nothing could be seen which suggested an opening. She had thought of having the whole thing screwed up, if, as she had expected, she had found a wooden framework around the hearthstone; but the tile-work extended right out to the large carpet, and on a portion of this being lifted it was found that the flooring of the room was of cement. This, indeed, was a peculiarity of all that portion of the mansion.

Beatrice took the wondering servants from one room to another, and lifted carpets or linoleum, only to find that the whole of them were floored with cement. There was nowhere a nook or cranny to give the slightest indication of what there might be below.

It was the same outside: great flagstones of hard and close texture everywhere met the eye.

Beatrice gave up the investigation with feelings of keen disappointment, and ordered lunch at once and the carriage to be ready immediately afterward; and dismissing her attendants she sauntered down the steep decline which led into the miniature valley at the north end of the house, to which reference has already been made. There were some stone steps here and there to break the steepness of the descent.

Looking more closely at one of them, she saw that it was cut out of the formation of the hill itself. The rock was of a greyish blue colour, and it flashed upon Beatrice that it was limestone.

"'Storm-Cliff Towers' is built upon a great hill of limestone," she said at last to herself. "And all the floors at this end are either stone or cement."

For some time she stood near the waterfall, looking up through the trees at the massive stone terrace and tower above her. She was evidently thinking something out, and at last turned her head around to where, in the distance, the Pacific Ocean stretched its waters toward the east. A great steamer was passing, bound north, but she scarcely heeded it.

"I should not be surprised to find that there are natural caves under this end of the house; the whole hill is one mass of limestone," she whispered to herself. But her heart sank within her as she climbed up the steep ascent.

"Fancy living by oneself in such a dreadful place, with some mysterious person, who may be your enemy, under the floor, and having access to the house—to murder one, perhaps."

She shuddered and felt her teeth chattering together notwithstanding the bright, warm morning sunshine. How she regretted that she had no brother or male relative to tell her trouble to. She felt more averse than ever to letting the servants know anything about it.

"Lucy," she said, on re-entering the house, "I don't care for that room. My uncle, I believe, used to sleep in it; move all my things out and we will lock it up and I will take the large room on the ocean side of the house, and you can bring your things into the dressing-room and sleep there for a few nights until I re-arrange matters."

Lucy made the alteration, nothing loath, for she felt by her mistress's manner that something had either happened or had come to her knowledge about the room which was of an unpleasant character. She thought also of her dream.

Lunch was no sooner over than William brought the carriage round, and Beatrice started for the city in solitary state. She would have taken Lucy with her for company, but wanted to be alone to think. She dared not come back to the place again without a man, if not two, for personal protection. She would hire a gardener, but she could not very well put him to sleep in the house.

The carriage rolled along the smooth suburban roads and then over the streets, and Beatrice had not yet decided what to say to her lawyer. Suddenly a luminous thought flashed into her mind. Her busi-

ness was in the hands of the youngest member of the firm of Bluntly, Blackham & Dorset, the eminent solicitors of Pitt Street. Mr Dorset was a clever lawyer, well connected and gentlemanly—and a bachelor. She would tell him nothing about what she had seen, but on some pretext bring him back with her in the carriage and keep him all night, and put him to sleep in the haunted chamber and await developments.

It was a bold scheme, but we must leave it to be seen, later on, how it fared and whether Beatrice was dealing fairly with the lawyer.

CHAPTER VI

THE DORSET FAMILY

It was an axiom of the Dorset family that every member of it was clever, but that a seventh child born into it must be a genius. Probably this accounted for the fact that there had always been a seventh child in every known branch of the Dorset family, and on more than one occasion the fortunate seventh had proved to be twins. The climax of the family fortunes was reached when the grandparents of Miss Ballantyne's solicitor became the progenitors of a fourteenth child, a son, who proved, as might have been expected, a star of the first magnitude. He became an eminent lawyer, and achieved distinction for a few months in the capacity of Prime Minister of Victoria, accumulated a moderate fortune, and a knighthood, being known to history as Sir George Dorset. His death took place soon after the birth of his seventh child, who was named by his fond mother Septimus Dorset.

Septimus had been destined to follow in the footsteps of his noble father, and enter the profession of the law. By birthright a genius, as already inferred, he was at the time of our story twenty-six years of age.

It should be stated that the business of Bluntly, Blackham & Dorset was largely in the youngest partner's hands, for Sir Joshua Bluntly had practically retired from active duty. Mr Blackham was in charge of the Court work, so the management of estates, the

drawing of deeds, and the confidential family portion of the business was the special care of Septimus, who, for his age, was supposed to know more about the private affairs of the bigwigs of the Colony than any other man in Sydney. He was a favoured son, idolised by his mother, flattered and fondled by his sisters, and looked up to by his brothers. The latter wanted him to go into politics and become Solicitor-General, but Septimus, for a genius, was uncommonly far-sighted, and had a soul above politics; the direction of his horizon being a Woollahra mansion, and a marriage with a wealthy and attractive girl.

When it first became known in the Dorset family that the heiress of Raymond Ballantyne, of "Storm-Cliff Towers," was a handsome English girl of a singularly independent turn of mind, and that she was coming out from England with four servants to personally take over her inheritance, quite a warm interest was felt in her. A letter from her solicitors awaiting her at Albany, the first port of call in those days, contained one enclosed from Lady Dorset, of Dorset Park, cordially inviting Beatrice to become their guest on her arrival.

Beatrice had at first been much inclined to accept this invitation, but she was of a cautious temperament in her dealings with strangers; so, after turning the matter over in her mind, she politely declined the invitation by wire, and asked Mr Dorset to engage rooms for her at the best hotel in Sydney.

Septimus had met his new client on board the steamer, and his respectful attentions appeared to have made a good impression, for Beatrice had been quite cordial in her thanks, and seemingly had given the firm her full confidence.

At Dorset Park, as might be expected, they talked of Beatrice Ballantyne as freely as though they had known her for half a lifetime. The girls were dying to meet her; Septimus' stately mother (the good lady never forgot that she was the widow of a one-time

Victorian Premier) evidenced a motherly interest in her, and much anxiety for her welfare; while Donald Dorset, the only other unmarried son, suddenly displayed unusual care in his toilet, and threw out dark hints of the possibility of his superseding his brother in Miss Ballantyne's affections. But the family generally regarded a marriage between Septimus and Beatrice as a dead certainty (that was the way Betty, the fast young lady of the family, put it), although they had not yet seen her; for their usually reserved and uncommunicative brother had come home in a state of mental intoxication, which disclosed at once the fact that the heiress had made a deep impression upon his not over sensitive heart. In fact, that very morning on which Beatrice started from "The Towers" to consult with him, her name had been the chief topic at the Dorset Park breakfast-table.

"Did I understand you to say that Miss Ballantyne was to take possession of 'The Towers' yesterday?" said Lady Dorset to Septimus, as he took his seat at the family breakfast-table.

"Very likely, mater," said Septimus; "she drove out about midday. I had intended to have gone with her to see that everything was in good order and the place nicely ready, but, unfortunately, Lord Brackenbury came in to see me with Sir Joshua about that Carlton land, and there was nothing for it but to send out Thompson. He reported, on his return, that everything was found in perfect order and that Miss Ballantyne expressed herself as quite charmed with the place."

"You have been out there several times, I suppose, since old Ballantyne suicided?" said Donald, passing up his cup for some more coffee. "Aren't there some queer yarns about the place being haunted?"

"Credulous people may be found anywhere, ready to believe anything," replied Septimus evasively.

"But, Septimus, do you believe it?" broke in his sister Betty, who occupied the end of the breakfast-

table and relieved Lady Dorset of pouring out the coffee and tea.

"Of course not! Do you think that I would have allowed Miss Ballantyne to have gone into possession, practically alone, if I had believed that she was likely to receive any shock to her nerves by so doing?"

"It was not altogether a wise thing," said Lady Dorset reflectively. "There should have been someone with Miss Ballantyne to remain in the house with her and her servants for the first night or two, until they became more used to the place."

"Septimus should have gone himself, mother, should he not?" said Alice, Lady Dorset's eldest daughter, roguishly. "It would have been a splendid opportunity to have made a good impression."

It should be explained that Alice was married and was only on a visit to Dorset Park, and, much as she admired her clever brother and praised him to her husband, who was a hard-worked squatter in the Bourke district, she aided and abetted her jocular sister in any endeavour to get some fun out of the more sedate members of the family.

"Ah!" remarked Betty, "I am fearful, Septimus, that you have missed the tide which, taken at the flood, leads on to—matrimony."

"I wish, Betty, that you would refrain from making such references," said Septimus severely. "It is not becoming for a lady. It might be excusable in one younger, but you are old enough to know better."

Betty, alas, was sixteen months older than her brother, and she winced a bit, as Septimus intended she should, at this reference to her age; but she was not so lightly to be set down.

"You have evidently taken the disease badly," retorted Betty. "I never dreamt that a lawyer could fall so suddenly in love."

"Do leave your brother alone, Betty," interrupted Lady Dorset, who always sided with her youngest.

"Now, mother, you don't think that Septimus

really minds a bit of banter about the fair Beatrice," said Donald. "If I could get hold of a good girl with as many thousands a year as she is understood to have, I'd let Betty plague me as much as she pleased. I have a good mind to drive you out to pay Miss Ballantyne a call this afternoon; the flood tide might set in my direction. What do you say, mother?"

"I should do nothing of the sort," interrupted Septimus with some warmth. "It would be altogether premature. I will drive mother out myself to-morrow. Give the girl a chance of getting her boxes unpacked and her household arrangements made before you call."

"If I were Beatrice Ballantyne," said Betty, "I'd never marry. If a woman has an income and a home, of what earthly use can a husband be to her."

"That's just what puzzles me," drawled out Donald; "and yet, somehow, at the wind up, there's generally a man about somewhere, and if there isn't, the woman is always looking for him behind the door or in dark corners."

"Say something new, Donald dear," retorted Betty.

"The newest things are not always true," replied Donald, "but an old saying is, for it is its truth which perpetuates it."

"Nonsense!" said Alice. "Some of the hoariest old lies the world has ever listened to, originated long ago with the devil."

"Ah! the poor old chap has a lot to answer for, has he not, Septimus?" said Donald.

"I never met the gentleman," said Septimus, smiling.

"You mean that you did not recognise him," said Betty. "You must, as a lawyer, have met with him often enough; they say that he has lately become a clergyman."

"Very good that, Betty; you must mean the Rev. Christopher Broadford of the parish of Storm-Cliff. He's a bachelor too. You ought to have met him, Septimus. I would not mind betting five pounds that he will be one of the earliest callers upon Miss Beatrice Ballantyne at 'The Towers.'"

"What wicked people you are becoming," said Lady Dorset, shaking her head at Donald and Betty. "I hear encouraging accounts of the good work Mr Broadford is doing in the parish. I wish we had a clergyman like him here."

"You might get him to marry Betty, mother," said Alice. "That is one of the misfortunes of living in a well-to-do parish: the clergymen are always married men, so that poor girls have no chance."

"Save your pity," said Betty. "It's bad enough to be married to a man, but to be married to a clergyman—why, look at the families they have, and how their wives have to work. There's poor Mrs Canon Doolittle; think what work she must have with a husband, a parish, and seven children. Every time she comes here to pay a call I feel inclined to say, 'Don't trouble yourself, Mrs Doolittle, we will come to church quite regularly without imposing any further burden upon *you*! My goodness! if I were married to a man like Canon Doolittle or Christopher Broadford, I'd let them know that there were such things as woman's rights and woman's wrongs. Clergymen have been women's worst enemies ever since the days of Paul; they have tried to put them down and keep them down, both in the church and out of the church. She must be silent, and stay at home, and ask her husband, and reverence and obey him. She must give up her soul, and body, and liberty, and opinions, and individuality, and even her name, and what does she get for it?"

"Love," answered Septimus gravely, interrupting his sister.

It was about the last thing anyone expected to hear

from the lips of the lawyer, and it came as a shock and resulted in a few moments' silence.

Betty looked as though she had a dozen answers ready upon the tip of her tongue; but Donald was the first to speak.

"You are about to ask, Betty, what the love is which Septimus refers to. I'll tell you. It's a sweet article, which, when exposed to the outside air at a certain temperature, turns sour. It retains its original flavour longest when bottled up. The first draught of it is to most people nectar; but only to a few does its sweetness continue to the end. Some women were not made for love and matrimony, and upon my word, Betty, I don't think such a state was intended by an all-wise Providence for you."

"What nonsense," exclaimed Alice impatiently. "Betty is just the very woman that would make a good man a loving and exemplary wife. She'd make as good a wife as Septimus would a husband."

At this Lady Dorset gave a practical turn to the conversation by remarking that it would give her the greatest possible pleasure to see Septimus married to Miss Ballantyne and Betty to Mr Broadford.

"Don't, mother, please don't!" expostulated Betty; but Lady Dorset meant it, and said so again, and the breakfast-room was directly afterward emptied of its occupants, amid general laughter.

CHAPTER VII

A WOMAN AND A LAWYER

STORM-CLIFF at the time of our story was stated in the directory to be eight and a half miles from Sydney; but as the name of the suburb has since been changed to a more pretentious one, the reader may be saved the trouble of looking for it there, or upon the map. At the time we write of, trams and suburban railway lines were in their infancy; the boom times were only looming upon the horizon; and, so far, the rural surroundings of Sydney and its suburbs were quiet and undisturbed. A coach ran daily past Storm-Cliff to a small township a few miles farther along the coast, carrying mails and any passengers who could be picked up; but it was an out-of-the-way district, and most people along the road kept their own conveyances.

On the advice of her solicitor, Beatrice had hired a carriage and pair of horses, by the week, at a Pitt Street livery-stable, so on reaching the town hall she alighted and told William to take the carriage round to the stables, put the horses up, and wait upon her at Bluntly, Blackham & Dorset's about noon. The drive had occupied an hour, and the town-hall clock chimed the half-hour after eleven as she turned down King Street.

It was a clear, crisp, bracing winter's morning, and Beatrice felt the comfort of her sealskin jacket and warm clothing. "Whoever would have expected to find Australia so cold a place as this," she thought.

Most of the men wore overcoats and the women furs, and the solid, well-to-do air of the brisk crowds which passed along the street, decidedly impressed her.

Although it was early, a considerable number of smart carriages were about the streets, and not a few curious glances were cast by their occupants at the well-dressed girl, who, with graceful mien, passed on toward Elizabeth Street. They could not see much of her face, for her veil was down, but her self-possession, easy carriage, and generally graceful bearing was noticeable, even in the well-dressed, affable, and self-satisfied city of Sydney.

"That girl can dance well," said a society man to a friend as they passed Beatrice and involuntarily turned their heads to have another glimpse of her. "How she carries her head, poses her figure, and lifts her feet. I'd like to know her."

Beatrice, however, was little concerned just now as to what people thought of her. To her they were as yet only "Colonials," and it seemed perfectly natural to the young English lady that she should attract attention, and be treated with deference, and have compliments paid her. She was newly rich, too, and her wealth had happened to her at an age and state of mental and social development when it best becomes a woman. Her education and social training enabled her to very fairly appraise the real value of money.

"This is one of the streets," she thought, "in which I have freehold property. I must get Mr Dorset to show me where it is."

Soon afterward she passed a fine pile of buildings, over the entrance of which there shone in gilt letters the words "Ballantyne Chambers," while numerous highly polished brass plates on each side of the doorway showed them to be both extensively and very respectably occupied.

The thought occurred to Beatrice that this might

be part of her property, and she walked on with, if anything, a still more sprightly step, for, as she confessed to herself, it was very nice to be rich—*and independent.* But somehow the thought of "Storm-Cliff Towers" and the strange occurrence of the previous night oppressed her, and when at last she had done her shopping and replenished her purse at the bank, she turned into the stylish office of her solicitors determined if possible to know all that there was to be known about the death of her Uncle Raymond and the antecedents of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

"Mr Dorset is engaged," said a pert office-boy in the inquiry-room. "Would not Mr Wileman do? He is a wonderful lawyer, mam." This he said confidentially, and added, "He is very nice with lady clients," and the youngster cocked his head on one side as though to fully note the effect of his words.

The boy was a wag in his way, and was thought by his fond family to have the makings of a splendid lawyer in him.

"Take my card straight in to Mr Dorset, and no matter who is with him say the lady is waiting in the outer office," answered Beatrice.

"But——" commenced the young gentleman.

Beatrice frowned severely at him. It was of no use, however. He mistook the mistress of "Storm-Cliff Towers" for someone else, and blurted out, "Really, miss, it's Mr Wileman you want to see; Mr Dorset never sees ladies except by special appointment."

Beatrice could scarcely refrain from laughing, notwithstanding her astonishment and annoyance, for the embryo lawyer was evidently very much in earnest.

"Go in then, and send Mr Wileman out to me," said Beatrice.

"You had better see him in his office, miss," said the youth.

"Will you please do as I bid you," said Beatrice, now thoroughly aroused.

At this the youth departed, muttering below his breath something about the obstinacy of women.

The moment after, however, his eye caught the name upon the card, and he saw his mistake, and at once hurried in to Mr Wileman.

"Did Miss Ballantyne ask for me, Dunstan?"

"No, sir, for Mr Dorset."

"Why, then, did you not take the card straight in, as you were told? Stand out of the road, you young fool," he said, bringing a heavy roll of foolscap with a ringing blow against the side of the youth's head.

Dunstan saw stars, while he promptly made his exit, and directly after noticed Mr Wileman, closely followed by Mr Dorset, leave the latter's room, and with many apologies usher the lady into it, after bowing out the former occupant.

"You seem very busy, Mr Dorset, and very difficult of access this morning," Beatrice said, smiling.

"Had I known that you were here, Miss Ballantyne, I would have laid any business aside at once. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you? You have had an early drive to be in the city so soon. I hope there is nothing wrong."

"No," replied Beatrice, and then she continued: "I am afraid that you will think me impatient, but now that I have seen 'The Towers,' I want to know something more about the supposed death of my uncle, and the past history of the place. I think that you said, too, that there was a quantity of family jewellery which had been sent for safe keeping to the bank. I suppose you have a list of it?"

Septimus Dorset was no doubt very busy that morning, but he did not dare to say so to Beatrice. The document containing a list of the Ballantyne jewellery was forthcoming from an iron box marked "The Ballantyne Estate," which was brought from the strong-room.

To gain a little time for inspection and signing of some important documents, Septimus suggested that

he would send across to the bank and have the jewels brought over for her personal inspection.

Beatrice at once concurred, and proceeded to carefully read the list which had been handed to her. She had not read more than half down the first side of foolscap, however, when she came to a description of a cat's-eye ring set round with diamonds.

She scarcely had patience to continue further. It was that ring, or a duplicate of it, which she had seen upon the fat but shapely second finger of that mysterious hand.

On the messenger's return, the package proved to be a bulky one, and Mr Dorset came out of the adjoining room, where he had retired to affix his signature to some deeds, to assist her in opening and inspecting it. Her coolness and seeming carelessness surprised him. She tumbled costly articles of jewellery on one side as though they were valueless. The fact was, she was looking for the cat's-eye ring—but it was missing!

She presently laid her finger under the line upon the list, and called Septimus Dorset's attention to it. "How is it," she asked, "that this ring is missing?"

Septimus hesitated for a moment, evidently embarrassed by the suddenness of the question; at which Beatrice looked up and fixed her eyes upon him—he was evidently somewhat disturbed.

He shook the feeling off, however, with an effort, and said hurriedly, "I had quite forgotten about that missing ring, Miss Ballantyne; sit down, please, and I will tell you what I know of it."

Beatrice looked at him suspiciously. She had never heard or read before of a lawyer being thrown off his guard, and it evidently was so with Mr Dorset.

Did he know aught of the lift before the large bedroom fireplace, or that the cat's-eye and diamond ring was in the possession of someone who had secret access to "The Towers"; and if so, why had he allowed her to go to "The Towers" unwarned and

alone? She swept the whole glittering mass together in a heap upon the table and sat down opposite Septimus to hear about the ring.

She was certainly a very handsome girl. She had loosened her sealskin jacket, and leaned back in her chair and looked at him. It was a cold, hard, determined look, however, such as he had occasionally seen on the face of a judge who had a difficult case to deal with.

The lawyer somehow felt the tables turned upon him. It was his place to interrogate and alarm people, but he saw in the face of Beatrice something which seemed to say: "Let there be no equivocation, sir, I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAT'S-EYE RING

"I SHOULD have preferred to have waited, Miss Ballantyne, until you had become more settled in your new home and surroundings, before telling you what you ask; but it might unduly excite your imagination, and possibly your suspicion, if I kept back what it is only right, and in accordance with the expressed wish of your uncle, that you should know."

How was it, as Septimus Dorset thus commenced, that a feeling of repulsion arose in the mind of Beatrice?—one of those mysterious monitions which sometimes come to us in life.

Long practice had made Septimus a smooth-spoken man; but somehow he was far less calm and confident, as he thus addressed himself to Beatrice, than usual, and the speech itself was unfortunate, for it suggested a doubt which otherwise might never have entered Beatrice's mind.

She thought, however, that the occasion demanded that she should be sympathetic, and she tried to look sympathetically at Septimus, so as to, if possible, assist him in his self-imposed task.

But it was only partially successful. A whole world of suggestive, if confused, thought had crowded into her mind, and it was not favourable to the solicitor.

He was, no doubt, a fine-looking man. His light-coloured hair was thick and wavy, his forehead intel-

lectual, his nose shapely, but his eyes (light blue), and mouth, and chin were less satisfactory.

Beatrice had never before looked so closely at him as now. She noticed that he had a trick of suddenly drawing in his breath when speaking; he fidgeted with his hands too, and scarcely looked at his visitor as he gave the following account of the loss of the mysterious ring:

"Before I had any personal knowledge of Mr Raymond Ballantyne," he said, "I saw the ring referred to, which I understand is valuable, not so much on account of its intrinsic worth, as of certain mysterious properties which it possesses. The facts are as follows:

"About three years ago a lady, closely veiled, called to see me about the transfer of some property which she had inherited in India. She was the widow, she told me, of a distinguished military officer, recently dead."

"There was nothing very difficult in the nature of the business which she wished to have transacted, and after I had taken down the particulars, the conversation turned upon India; she was evidently an educated woman and a brilliant conversationalist. I was so interested, I remember, in the subject of her conversation, that I sat talking beyond our usual hour of closing, and the resident clerk, after a while, came to the door to ask if I had called him. (I should say that he is permitted thus to remind me, or any laggard client I may have with me, of the lateness of the hour.)

"At this my visitor rose to go, on which it occurred to me to ask her to attach her signature to a letter I had drawn up.

"She then lifted her veil, and also removed her gloves, for the first time. The face was that of a very handsome woman of about thirty or thirty-five, with large brown eyes and a dark olive skin, which just, but only just, suggested the possibility of Creole blood. She had two or three handsome rings upon

her fingers, and among them was a cat's-eye set in heavy gold, with a circle of large diamonds. It attracted my attention immediately, for I thought it too large and too conspicuous for a lady's hand.

"She had risen to sign the letter, but suddenly sat down again and abruptly said, 'Mr Dorset, I belong to the membership of the Silent Ones, will you excuse me if, for a few moments, I sit still and think before signing this document?'

"I bowed my head, scarcely knowing what reply to make her, when she closed her right hand—upon the third finger of which was the ring—and rested it carelessly upon the table in such a manner that the jewel of the ring was directly opposite me. It must have been imagination, but it seemed to me as though the eye of the ring became possessed of human intelligence, and that the hand had been placed in its position for some purpose; but I treated the thought with contempt and dropped my eyes upon the letter which still lay on the blotting-pad upon the table in front of me.

"She sat there in perfect silence for fully five minutes, during which time I seemed to pass through the whole of the thirty-seven states described by the Buddhists. For the time I believe that I sat there wholly in the power of that strange woman who, to use her own words, 'had gone into the silence.'

"Never before had I realised the significance of human silence. I seemed during those few minutes to experience all those emotions which, when carried to extremity, are without voice. Terror, rage, astonishment, joy, peace, perfect sympathy, in turn, possessed me. It was as though that woman's soul and my own had interpenetrated each other, and when at last she broke the long pause, it was as though her words were the echo of some spirit music which I had already heard elsewhere.

"I had scarcely recovered myself when she had signed the document and was gone.

"I did not think very much of the incident after a few days, for we were just then engaged in two important law cases; but about a month afterward your uncle called one afternoon at the office. He had recently returned from a two years' absence from the Colonies, he said, during which time he had visited many places in the East, and had been in several parts of India. The matter he called about was not of any great importance, and I should probably not have thought so much about his visit, but that he wore on one hand a ring singularly like that which had so much impressed me upon the finger of Mrs Dalbert, for that was my lady visitor's name.

"The following day Mr Ballantyne called at the office in a state of great excitement; he had lost a cat's-eye ring, he said, which he greatly valued. He had worn it on the previous day, and thought that he might have chanced to have dropped it in the office. Would I have the place searched?

"I did this, of course, to oblige him, but it was, as I expected it would be, a vain quest.

"The ring, I felt sure, had left our office upon your uncle's finger. However, as he seemed disinclined to go, I respectfully questioned him as to his doings after he had left the office, and found out that he had visited a friend at Leichardt and had afterwards driven to 'The Towers' in a hired conveyance. This I found out was a hansom cab, and that he had gone in it direct from Leichardt.

"It suddenly occurred to me that the address given me by Mrs Dalbert was in Leichardt. I thought it singular, and suggested that I presumed he had returned home alone.

"He did not answer me at all promptly, and seemed confused, but then replied, 'Certainly I was alone. Why do you ask such a question?'

"I suggested then that an effort should be made to find the cabman, who might know something of the ring, but your uncle put the suggestion on one

side. He knew the man very well, he said; he had driven him home before, he was perfectly honest.

"I was, however, still suspicious, and had an advertisement inserted in *The Telegraph* for the cabman. I did this knowing that your uncle read *The Morning Herald*, and would be unlikely to see it. The advertisement was so worded, however, that I felt very hopeful that it would reach the eye of someone who would tell the cabman. This proved correct, for a day or two afterward the cabman called in response to the advertisement.

"He was shown into my room. I at once took a bold stand and asked him what time it was when he returned to Sydney after driving Mr Ballantyne and a lady to Storm-Cliff.

"He answered, without hesitation, that it was exactly a quarter to ten.

"'Mr Ballantyne lost a valuable ring that night,' I said.

"'It was not left in the cab,' replied the man.

"'I want to get to the bottom of this matter,' I said, 'so I will get you to at once drive me out to Mrs Dalbert's place at Leichardt.'

"It was a random shot, but proved to be quite correct, and a few minutes afterward we were bowling along George Street toward Leichardt.

"I found Mrs Dalbert, as I had expected, and made an excuse for calling, which seemed to satisfy her. I said nothing about Mr Ballantyne, but noted that there sparkled upon her finger the ring which had previously made so strange an impression upon me. I did not think it wise to ask any questions, and left the house under the impression that there must be two rings of similar materials and workmanship, and that one had been worn by Raymond Ballantyne, and the other by Mrs Dalbert, in accordance with some mutual agreement.

"I wondered whether your uncle, when in India,

met with Mrs Dalbert, and joined the 'membership of the Silent Ones.'

"It was about this time, Miss Ballantyne, that your uncle put the whole of his legal affairs in the hands of my firm, and, for the further explanation thereof, brought in a sort of bailiff or caretaker, who had had charge of 'The Towers' during his absence. This man was named Skinner, and was singularly like your uncle; indeed, except that he was somewhat stouter, they might, casually, have been taken for the same person. I believe that he was not really a servant, but a mechanical engineer reduced in circumstances. He and your uncle were evidently very friendly and intimate, and I heard it said that during your uncle's absence Skinner had told some of the neighbours that he was a relation.

"A few weeks afterward some legal business took me out to Storm-Cliff, and I was shown into the library to see Mr Ballantyne. To my surprise I found upon his hand the cat's-eye ring.

"I at once congratulated him on having found it, when, to my embarrassment, he looked long and fixedly at the ring without replying.

"At last he said, 'Mr Dorset, never allow yourself to be fascinated by a woman or a ring. Either may involve you in difficulty and trouble, but the two together may bring ruin and death.'

"I was surprised at his words, which seemed almost meaningless to me then, and was about to make some response when he abruptly called my attention to the business which had taken me to 'The Towers.'

"I can only explain my after conduct on the supposition that I was under some occult fascination.

"I went again to Leichardt and saw Mrs Dalbert; but on her finger there was no ring. I made excuses and called a second and third time, but on the last occasion the house was closed, and Mrs Dalbert had left no address and no clue by which she could be traced. For some time after that I never met your

uncle but that I noticed he wore the ring. Shortly before his death, however, I saw him again, but the ring was not on his hand, and I thought that he had suddenly aged very much.

"He lifted up his hand and said, 'See, Dorset, I have lost the ring again.' I knew then that there had only been one ring all the time.

"We heard of your uncle's death almost immediately after. Two persons swore at the inquiry that they saw him throw himself over the rocks. The body was never recovered, the supposition being that it was carried, by an ocean current, out to sea, and there devoured by sharks. I was startled, however, when taking possession of his personal effects and papers, on behalf of the executors, to find this memorandum in one of the drawers of a private escritoire."

Septimus at this handed Beatrice a slip of paper, on which there was written the following in Raymond Ballantyne's peculiarly cramped handwriting:

"I, Raymond Ballantyne, hereby direct my solicitors, that should my death occur unaccountably, suddenly, or by violence, he shall impress it upon my heir to beware of a man or woman wearing a cat's-eye ring."

CHAPTER IX

A TRUTH HALF TOLD

BEATRICE handed the paper back to Septimus Dorset with mingled feelings. She had read it with horror, for it seemed like a warning to her, from another world, against a danger which already confronted her. Her very flesh crept at the thought that this menace was positively with her, beneath her own roof.

For a moment she had nearly told Septimus her secret, but a suspicion that her lawyer had only told her a part of the truth kept her silent.

How she arrived at this conclusion it would be difficult to explain, unless it was that there is something about a half-told truth which lacks the ring of genuineness, and that it was this which had grated upon Miss Ballantyne's ear and aroused her suspicions as to the full veracity of the story. Not that she attributed to Septimus any intention to do her wrong; but there was something in the very hesitation of his manner and the studied caution with which he had spoken, which suggested that a good deal had been withheld.

Some of the facts which Septimus had not told her were as follows:

Meta Dalbert was a cousin of Raymond Ballantyne's. Septimus had not, it is true, met her before the interview of which he had told Beatrice; but he had heard of her and knew of her questionable and ambitious character, and at the time of the interview,

he knew, or guessed, what her influence over Raymond Ballantyne was.

The latter and Mrs Dalbert had met in India after the death of her husband, and her visit to the lawyer was in reference to business which concerned both herself and her cousin.

What Septimus had said about the effect of the silence upon him, and the singular fascination or influence of the ring, was practically true, but he had concealed the fact that, although considerably older than himself, Meta Dalbert had fascinated him, and aroused in him a fierce jealousy of Raymond Ballantyne.

Another thing which had been withheld from Beatrice was the fact that Raymond Ballantyne had, some years before, made a will bequeathing the whole of his property to Mrs Dalbert; but that circumstances had arisen on account of which this will had never been signed, and the one by which Beatrice inherited had been executed.

Nor had the fact of a supposed relationship between Owen Skinner and Mrs Dalbert been referred to; nor the fact that Raymond Ballantyne was addicted to the morphia habit, and that his life at "Storm-Cliff Towers" was, in many ways, singular and exclusive. He had held aloof from the neighbours, and would hold no intercourse with any outside the circle of his own household except absolutely obliged. Whether Meta Dalbert and Owen Skinner had anything to do with Raymond Ballantyne's mysterious death, Septimus Dorset had no positive knowledge; but he had his suspicions, and the passion which Meta Dalbert had inspired in him found its opposite in his dislike of Owen Skinner. Soon after the death of Mr Ballantyne, and it had been made known who was the heir, Skinner had somewhat ostentatiously removed himself and his belongings to a small residence about half a mile distant from Storm-Cliff, and Septimus knew that Meta Dalbert was still living in, or near,

Sydney. He had ceased now, however, to concern himself much about either of them, and was only anxious to ingratiate himself with Beatrice. Here, he thought, was the opportunity of a suitable and advantageous marriage if he only played his cards right, and he intended if possible to do so. It had never occurred to him that the matter of the ring would have come so suddenly to the front.

"I would like to ask you a question or two, Mr Dorset," said Beatrice, after a short silence.

"With pleasure, Miss Ballantyne," replied Septimus.

"Who had charge of 'The Towers' during my uncle's absence in India and elsewhere?"

"I believe that it was a Mr Skinner, and a man and his wife who waited upon him."

"Was any portion of the house closed up during that period?"

"I really cannot say."

"Have you any suspicion as to how and where my uncle lost his ring?"

"No."

"You believe that the ring you saw upon the hand of Mrs Dalbert, and that which my uncle wore, was the same?" said Beatrice, slightly blushing.

"I can come to no other conclusion."

"Do you think that she received it from him as a gift, or stole it?" asked Beatrice.

"That I cannot say."

"But I asked you whether you *thought* so?"

"I did think so at the time, but I do not think so now."

"Why?"

"If your uncle had suspected that Mrs Dalbert had the ring there would have been no need to have warned you, by that memorandum, to beware of the person wearing the ring."

"Is there anyone here whom you think might benefit by my death?" asked Beatrice gravely.

"Certainly not, unless you executed a will in their favour," replied the lawyer; "you inherit the property without conditions. Your next of kin would be the heir."

"I wish to engage a butler and gardener, and am going to buy a large mastiff dog," said Miss Ballantyne abruptly. "I have other things to attend to which will occupy me most of the afternoon. There are several matters about which I should like to consult with you, Mr Dorset; would it inconvenience you to come out to 'The Towers' to dinner?"

"I should be very pleased," replied Septimus.

"If you could leave by four o'clock you might come out with me in the carriage," said Beatrice.

"I wish to talk with you," she continued, after a moment's pause, "for I am not at all sure that I shall remain in Australia; indeed I am thinking of selling some of the properties and returning to England."

"I shall have much pleasure in going with you, and will be ready by the time you start," said Septimus.

. . . . . .

In the meantime the Rev. Christopher Broadford had arranged with himself to make an early call upon his new parishioner.

He was a fussy little man, with a smiling face and genial manner. And while Beatrice was driving out to Storm-Cliff with her lawyer and the new gardener and a mastiff on the box-seat by the side of William, Mr Broadford was drinking afternoon tea, prepared for him by Lucy, while waiting the return of the mistress of "The Towers."

Probably Lucy had acceded to the clergyman's suggestion, that he would await the return of Miss Ballantyne, more cheerfully on account of the loneliness and unfamiliar nature of the surroundings, and the fact that she had always been taught to regard a clergyman as a privileged guest. With William

and her mistress away, and only women about the place, he seemed a kind of protection to them, and both Lucy and the clergyman awaited, somewhat impatiently, Miss Ballantyne's return.

His waiting moments were, however, beguiled by pleasant visions of the future. Miss Ballantyne, he had heard, was a good churchwoman and would be a helper to him in the parish.

If some good angel had warned the Rev. Christopher Broadford to betake himself as quietly as possible home, it would have saved him much after anxiety and perplexity, if nothing worse; but when good angels might be of the greatest service to us, they are, unfortunately, often absent; and it was so on this occasion, for the clergyman was still waiting when the carriage with Beatrice and her lawyer drove up to the house.

CHAPTER X

BEATRICE ENTERTAINS

Septimus Dorset could make himself an agreeable and interesting companion when occasion called for it, and during the drive to Storm-Cliff he exerted himself to remove any unfavourable impression which he might have made upon his wealthy and beautiful client.

It surprised him to find that Beatrice "had so much in her." He found that she could talk intelligently upon all ordinary subjects, and on others, too, which Septimus regarded as somewhat out of the ordinary. Only in one particular did the lawyer's judgment decide adversely in the matter of his client's conduct. She would "talk shop." Again and again she abruptly brought her companion back from the regions of sentiment and literature to business.

"What a mercenary creature she is," thought Septimus, when Beatrice suddenly wound up an interesting discussion upon the beauties of the Vatican picture-galleries by an inquiry as to the estimated value of the Storm-Cliff property, including furniture, and whether he thought it likely that a buyer could readily be obtained.

"Not readily, I fear, Miss Ballantyne," Septimus had answered, and he determined to oppose and discourage the selling of "The Towers" as far as possible. Let Miss Ballantyne once leave Australia for

England, and any small chance he had of marrying her would be gone.

He was not really sorry on arriving at the house to find the Rev. Christopher Broadford awaiting them. Having met this gentleman before, he was able to introduce him to Miss Ballantyne. It relieved the situation of any awkwardness, and besides, some men are far more effective and brilliant when set against another; especially if the other possesses sufficient good parts to put the first upon his mettle. It was so on this occasion with the clergyman, and Beatrice was really pleased to find him willing to stay for dinner.

Beatrice had been trying that afternoon to meet with a suitable lady-companion, and also a butler, for she had a wholesome regard for what Mrs Grundy might say about her living alone at "The Towers," and she suspected that in such matters the place had not the best of names. However, she had not been able to please herself in this respect so readily as in the matter of a mastiff dog and gardener, and the butler and lady-companion were still being sought for. The presence of the clergyman at dinner would have a wholesome influence upon the household, and also upon her own reputation as a good churchwoman, and Beatrice mentally decided that after dinner she would have the whole establishment in to evening prayers.

She suggested this to Mr Broadford after soup had been served, and Beatrice at once rose greatly in his estimation.

"Do you conduct service at the village church every Sunday, Mr Broadford?" asked Beatrice.

"I have that pleasure," said Christopher, blushing with gratification at the interest which Beatrice was taking in his work.

But to tell the honest truth, the thoughts of Miss Ballantyne, just then, were not occupied with the church, or its ministers, or ministrations. She wanted two men to sleep in the house; she had them there,

and she proposed, if possible, to keep them. But the question was how? She ought to offer Septimus Dorset the carriage to drive him to the nearest railway station, some three miles distant, and the clergyman would, of course, want to go home. He was not married, but he had a sister, and not infrequently sisters were more exacting than wives.

Septimus, however, had made up his mind to stay late if possible. He had noticed both a harp and piano in the drawing-room, and there was a small pipe organ in the dining-room, which he had ascertained Beatrice could play. Music is a wonderful assistance to cordiality and kindly feeling, and both Septimus Dorset and Christopher Broadford could sing, and the former of the two really well. Each was anxious for an opportunity to display his gifts to the best advantage, and after dinner was over, neither showed any anxiety to make an early evening of it.

Lucy it was who announced in the kitchen that the mistress requested their presence in the dining-room to prayers.

It made a great commotion. Joe, the new gardener, expressed his regret that he had engaged with a canting Methodist, and the cook grumbled that she would have to specially tidy herself; but William and his wife sided with Lucy, who thought the young mistress very right in taking advantage of the minister's visit. "If there was more praying in the world," she said, "it would be better for everyone."

They trooped into the room at the appointed time and sat near the door upon chairs which the housemaid had arranged for them; the mastiff, who had become very friendly with Joe, followed them and stretched his huge limbs by that worthy's chair.

The clergyman, with his prayer book open before him, smiled benignly from the end of the long table upon the group, and congratulated himself upon the addition he was likely to gain for the evening service.

And a moment afterwards Beatrice came in from the conservatory accompanied by the lawyer, who escorted her to the organ, the keyboard of which had been thrown open for the occasion. The organ was one of the few hobbies of the late Raymond Ballantyne, and it was found to be in good order.

The prayers were read, and presently, after the lesson, the clergyman announced the evening hymn. William knew at once, even while the prelude was being played over, that his wife was about to cry; his only hope was that she would keep it to herself until it was all over. The hymn was played and sung with taste and feeling, and sounded very sweet and homely, and as the closing prayer was uttered and the benediction pronounced, even Joe muttered "Amen."

After prayers both Beatrice and her guests felt much more at home. When they entered the drawing-room together, Mr Broadford suggested that Miss Ballantyne should favour them with a song. Beatrice had sung but one verse of a plaintive Welsh melody, when she paused to listen. It was raining in torrents, and she knew, at once, that both her visitors would have to stay the night.

It proved to be a furious storm which soughed through the tree-tops, and wailed around the turrets and pinnacles, and sent the driving rain in drenching violence upon everything unsheltered. It was impossible for anyone to leave the protection of a friendly roof on such a night; so it was settled that the lawyer and the clergyman should occupy the two rooms which, on the previous night, had been first taken possession of by Beatrice and her maid.

In view of the events of the night, it may be as well to call attention to the arrangement of the principal apartments of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

The entrance hall faced the west, and on entering it the visitor found himself surrounded by half a dozen doors and a corridor which branched off from the hall. To right and left were the doorways leading to

a reception-room and the drawing-room, which led respectively from the principal bedroom and adjoining dressing-room. The rooms into which Beatrice and her maid had removed were some distance down the corridor and upon the other side, so that only a loud noise would be noticeable from one to the other of these rooms.

The evening, with the aid of singing, and music, and conversation, passed pleasantly; bright coal and wood fires burned cheerfully in the various rooms, and every part of the mansion seemed to be lit up. Beatrice almost forgot her fears, and it was late before the gentlemen were shown to their rooms and the house settled down to the hushed quietness of night.

Beatrice, however, looked around her own snug and richly furnished room with some misgivings. It also had a cemented floor, and she wondered to herself as to the possibilities of what might be underneath. She called Lucy into her room on two occasions on idle excuses, and finally made her build up a large coal fire and place a night-light upon a small table near at hand. She also bade Lucy leave the door between the two rooms ajar in case she might call to her in the night. Then she lay still, and watched the dancing firelight, and listened.

The storm had lulled, and the cry of a night-bird near the house made her start with sudden apprehension. She blamed herself now for having put the lawyer in that room; but then he was a man and might make a discovery, and he had the clergyman within call. Then she again listened . . . and listened . . . and listened . . . !

What a blessed thing is sleep. To sink into unconsciousness and forget oneself and all one's vexed surroundings; to go back again, as it were, into the womb of pre-existence, and for a while lie dead to the world, to awake with restored vigour and new strength.

The fire still glowed dimly through the room, and a coal occasionally rattled noisily down into the fender,

but the soft, regular breathing of Beatrice might have told an intruder that it was unheard; for sleep, which the poet says is "loved from pole to pole," and which Scripture declares God gives "to His beloved," had wrapped the inmates of "The Towers" in slumber—at least the rightful inmates of "The Towers."

Beatrice slept—not exactly the sleep of innocence or utter weariness, but the sleep which comes alike to the criminal in his cell, to the mariner upon the sea, and the soldier upon the blood-stained battle-field—the sleep of forgetfulness. But in the present case it was not an wholly untroubled sleep, for Beatrice was conscious of the fact that she had exposed the lawyer, unwarned, to an actual danger, and the thoughts of the day took form and colour in the visions of the night.

Unconsciously she muttered and then spoke words aloud, which awakened Lucy, who came in, thinking herself called; but Beatrice slept, and the girl went back to her warm bed again, wondering what ailed her mistress that she should have called so loudly in her sleep.

But, in the meantime, *there was one in the lawyer's chamber who was not asleep!*

CHAPTER XI

THE LAWYER DISAPPEARS

Lucy awoke early the following morning. All sign of rain had cleared off. The sun had not yet risen above the Pacific horizon, but the coming of the monarch of day was already heralded by stray gleams of colour which shot upward from the ocean's bed.

Lucy prided herself upon her early rising, and sometimes gave herself airs of absurd superiority to the rest of the household because she was able to do with so little sleep. This morning she had planned a lot of work which she wished to get through with before she would be wanted by her mistress.

Boxes had still to be unpacked, and the articles they contained arranged in drawers and wardrobes, and she busied herself with her duties, laughing quietly as she thought over some of the droll stories which Joe, the new gardener, had been telling them the previous night.

By his own account he had been born on a Manly excursion boat, and his after career had been as eccentric as his birth.

Outside, Lucy could hear the distant thunder of the ocean upon the rocks. Miss Beatrice and her visitors had been late, she thought; they would breakfast late.

A few minutes afterward Lucy was passing along the corridor when she met the clergyman.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Lucy. Have you seen Mr Dorset about anywhere?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, all right," and the reverend gentleman returned to his room again.

"They are up early," thought Lucy; "I must hurry the housemaid and tell cook to have breakfast ready. Mr Dorset may wish to start in good time for town, and will want the carriage."

Another hour, however, passed, but neither Mr Broadford nor Mr Dorset had shown themselves, and the breakfast being ready to serve, the housemaid rang the dressing-bell.

Mr Broadford came out of his room with apprehension plainly marked upon his countenance.

"Send one of your men-servants to me," he said to the girl.

Shortly after, William knocked at his door.

"Go in there and see if there is anything wrong with Mr Dorset," said the clergyman.

William pushed back the slightly opened door between the two rooms, and entered the apartment which Mr Dorset had occupied. It was empty!

Neatly arranged upon a sofa were the lawyer's clothes, and the bedclothes were thrown back. The bed had evidently been slept in, but there was no sign of any haste, or disturbance, or struggle. The large room was in its accustomed order, and both doors and windows were closed.

"The gentleman must have gone to the beach to bathe in his dressing-gown and pyjamas," said William.

"Do you think so?" said Mr Broadford, feeling slightly relieved. "Rather an unusual thing to do in midwinter."

"Oh, that's nothing," said the man, "it's never very cold, I should think, in this country; bless you, sir, I have known them to go out and bathe in the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London, when they had to break the ice to get in."

The clergyman expressed some doubt as to the

accuracy of this statement, but urged the man to have a good look around to see if he could find any trace of Mr Dorset, and in the meantime he would report the matter to Miss Ballantyne.

There was no need, however, for Mr Broadford to report the matter, for Beatrice had already been told by Lucy that something had happened to Mr Dorset.

The girl was startled at the effect which the intelligence had upon her mistress. She had just before told her that the two gentlemen were up. But the housemaid had brought word that not only was Mr Dorset missing, but that he had left the house without his clothes.

Beatrice had just finished dressing, and listened to Lucy's words without turning round. She felt like one suddenly petrified.

"It was wrong!" escaped her lips. Then she turned round with a face ashy pale, and Lucy ran to her; but only just in time. She helped her to lie down, and then rang loudly for assistance. Miss Ballantyne had fainted.

There was at once a great commotion all through the house. William had gone out to search the grounds, and rocks, and beach for the missing lawyer. Joe was sent by Lucy on one of the horses for a doctor, for she found that the ordinary simple remedies failed to restore her mistress to consciousness.

On the doctor's arrival, however, Miss Ballantyne had partially recovered. She apologised to him that her servants should have hurried him to "The Towers" with such urgency, but requested him, as he was present and happened to be a Justice of the Peace, to advise with Mr Broadford as to what had better be done in regard to the disappearance of Mr Dorset.

By this time William had returned, and stated that he had carefully searched the grounds, and beach, and rocks for a mile around the house, but had found no trace of Mr Dorset. He had inquired, too, of some

fishermen, but they said that no one had been seen bathing, in fact that it was far too rough and cold and dangerous for anyone to attempt to do such a thing.

Christopher Broadford at once suggested the placing of the matter in the hands of the police; but Dr Strong was a man of experience.

"My dear sir," he said, "the matter may be explained without making a scandal of it, which would naturally annoy Mr Dorset's family, who are influential people. You see, although the circumstances of the case are singular, it is possible that some very simple explanation may be at hand. Do you know whether every part of the interior of the house has been examined?"

Mr Broadford had not thought of this, so the doctor went to consult Miss Ballantyne, and obtained her permission to thoroughly examine the house for the missing man. It seemed to him, during this second interview, that the unpleasant affair had given a great shock to Miss Ballantyne's nerves, and he advised her to remain quietly in her room, and instructed Lucy to give her mistress her very best attention.

He knew Mr Dorset's family, he said, and he would superintend the thorough searching of the house. He might have gone out somewhere in the night and have injured himself or fainted; it was unwise of Miss Ballantyne to unduly agitate herself, probably there was some very simple explanation to be found which would clear up the whole mystery.

Dr Strong now instituted a careful personal search of the premises, in company with the clergyman and the coachman. He commenced with the room which had been occupied by Mr Dorset.

It has already been described as a large and handsome apartment, and the doctor curiously scrutinised every corner of it.

"We will not disturb anything," he said, "lest an inquiry should be found necessary."

On examination it was found that in the pockets of the clothes were a purse, keys, and other knick-knacks. Mr Dorset's gold watch and chain lay upon the dressing-table, where they had evidently been placed by their owner. The watch was still going.

"We had better lock all these things up; it is evident that there has been no robbery committed," said Dr Strong.

A door led from the room into a large conservatory; this was unlocked, and the party passed out among ferns and foliage plants, but there was no sign of anyone having been hidden there, and the place was undisturbed. There were six doors from this: four leading from the conservatory into various rooms of the mansion, one on to the north terrace, and one into the grounds facing the ocean; the two latter doors were locked upon the inside. The doctor also examined some large sliding glass panels, which were also fastened. There was evidently nothing to be discovered in this direction, so they turned back into the room and locked the doors again as they had found them.

The three men stood on the rich carpet and once more surveyed the room of mystery. Raymond Ballantyne's portrait looked down upon them from over the fireplace. The whole surrounding of the room bespoke a cultured taste and the wealth to gratify it.

"It's a strange affair!" ejaculated the doctor, looking for a moment at the young clergyman. "The man can't possibly have gone away without his clothes! It is impossible that he can have been abducted—there would have been a struggle, and you, Mr Broadford, would have heard that something was transpiring. I believe you said that the door between the two rooms was ajar?"

The clergyman's face coloured slightly, for this was the first suggestion that he might possibly be suspected of having been concerned with the lawyer's disappearance. It had never crossed his mind before,

and for a moment he felt confused under the doctor's scrutiny.

"The door *was* ajar. Mr Dorset suggested that it should be left so in order that I might give him a call in the morning. Of course I heard nothing, or I should have mentioned it," said the clergyman.

The doctor carefully locked all the doors and placed the key of the one leading into the entrance hall and that leading into the room Mr Broadford had occupied in his pocket.

There were four other rooms leading into the conservatory, each of which was carefully examined, and then the rooms on the other side of the house, and the servants' quarters—over twenty rooms in all. Not the slightest clue, however, was obtained that might suggest a solution of the mystery.

A good quarter of an hour was then spent in searching the stables and outbuildings, and the doctor and clergyman exhibited some signs of impatience with their fruitless search.

"There is the North Tower yet," said William; "but it is impossible that the gentleman can have found his way there."

"Nothing is impossible!" exclaimed the doctor testily.

The tower was a squarely built, solid mass of masonry at the north end of the main building, and was entered from the main external corridor, which surrounded this part of the house.

The three rooms, one above the other, were furnished but not occupied. The lower one was fitted up as a kind of writing and smoking-room, that above it as a bedroom, and the third as a kind of observatory; a number of scientific instruments, including a powerful telescope, being found there, and books upon astronomy and other kindred sciences. William had heard that Mr Skinner had specially occupied these rooms during Mr Ballantyne's residence, and that he also used the lower room and the room from

which Mr Dorset had disappeared, while Mr Ballantyne had been away.

The doctor proceeded to examine these rooms with the greatest minuteness and interest.

"We will commence," he said, "at the top."

From the flat roof of the summit a view of the whole surrounding country and of the sea was visible; but they were too intent upon their search to be much interested just then in extensive views of the scenery.

The stairs were narrow and abrupt, but a thick carpet gave an air of comfort to the whole of the quaint structure. There was much which, under other circumstances, would have interested both the doctor and the clergyman in the topmost room. There were windows on each of the four sides. There was no table in the centre of the floor, which was covered with linoleum; but two circles were drawn together there, and inner circles inside of them.

The clergyman started as he looked at them, as though he had read of or seen something of the sort before.

"Some unhallowed enchantment," he said, pointing to the floor.

"More likely the place where some revolving scientific instruments have been fixed," said the doctor.

But although he turned it off thus lightly, the doctor had his doubts, for the whole place had an uncanny look about it.

"Reminds one of Milton's 'Il Penseroso,'" said he to the clergyman, as they together descended to the next floor.

"'Or let my lamp at midnight's hour
Be seen in some high, lonely tower,
Where I may oft outwatch the bear
With thrice great Hermes; or unsphere
The spirit of Plato, to unfold what worlds
Or what vast regions hold the immortal mind,
Which hath forsook her mansion in this fleshly nook.'"

But this was on effort on the part of the doctor, for he was intent upon unravelling the mystery of the lawyer's disappearance.

The room they had by this time entered was an ordinary bedroom, about eighteen feet by twenty; there was nothing to be learnt here, so they descended to the lower apartment, where the doctor flung himself into a large easy-chair and looked thoughtfully around.

There were two windows on one side of the room only—that which overlooked the front terrace; the growth of fir trees just beyond shutting out the view of everything except their sombre foliage.

"It is useless to make any further search for Mr Dorset here," said the doctor; "but I am loath to make any unnecessary alarm. You have nothing to suggest, William?"

"No, sir," said the coachman.

"You heard no unusual sound at any time during the night?"

"Nothing," replied William emphatically.

"Go and call in all the other servants except Miss Ballantyne's maid, that I may question them too."

This, however, elicited nothing, so the doctor decided to at once drive into town and make inquiries at Mr Dorset's office, and acquaint his family with the alarming intelligence.

"What a secluded study this would make, doctor," said the clergyman.

"I would go mad in it," replied Dr Strong.

"Queer," he continued, after a moment's silence, "that every floor at this end of the building should be of cement. This one is too," he said, stamping his foot on the carpet to prove his assertion.

An unmistakable click was heard, as though a bolt or latch had suddenly shot into its place.

The two men started and looked at each other.

"Did you hear that?" said the doctor.

The clergyman nodded, and both men listened for a minute breathlessly.

"It must have been something loose under the carpet, or the heel of your boot," said the clergyman.

"Boot be hanged!" ejaculated the doctor. He was about to add something more, but he restrained himself. Then he said quietly, "It may have been my boot."

CHAPTER XII

A GIRL IN A THOUSAND

Dr Strong's gig was waiting; but before leaving for town he again looked in upon Beatrice, who, he could see, was in a very distressed state of mind.

She had not left her room, nor assisted in any way in the search; but even allowing for the shock to her nerves, he could not understand how the matter should have so thoroughly prostrated her. He was naturally of an inquiring turn of mind, and was certainly interested both in "The Towers" and its owner. He had not had an opportunity during the lifetime of Mr Ballantyne of seeing over the place, and the news of Miss Ballantyne's arrival had been much talked of in the neighbourhood.

"Miss Ballantyne, you are not well enough to be left alone with the servants. I will send my sister Grace over this afternoon, and call back on my return from Sydney to see how you are and tell you anything which may further transpire."

. . . . . .

There are few who have not something by which they are known; but Grace Strong was, as her brother often put it, a girl in a thousand. She had been brought up with her brother by well-to-do and indulgent parents in the south of England, and had come to Australia with John to help him to carve his way to fortune in a new land. The doctor and the clergyman were both unmarried men, having sisters

keeping house for them, and, living as they did, not five minutes' walk from each other in Storm-Cliff village, it is not very surprising that Grace Strong and the clergyman's sister, Alice Broadford, had become fast friends. They had already projected a visit to "The Towers" together to call upon Miss Ballantyne when the incidents narrated transpired.

"Grace, I want you to go across to 'Storm-Cliff Towers' and stop with Miss Ballantyne until I can get back from Sydney," said the doctor.

"What is the matter? Is she seriously ill that you are going for a nurse, or more advice?" asked his sister.

In a few words he briefly explained what had happened, and how necessary it was that Beatrice should have cheerful society. "I don't like the place," he said, "and I think that something beyond Mr Dorset's disappearance has frightened her. She seems to me an exceedingly nice girl, unfortunately circumstanced through having no relations, and I think that you would be doing a really kind and good deed by making yourself friendly to her."

It was quite enough to suggest to Grace Strong that she would be a helper, to arouse all her sympathies and effort, and within an hour she was on her way across the common to "Storm-Cliff Towers."

Beatrice had at once liked Dr Strong. His decision of character and frank openness of speech and manner had favourably impressed her, as indeed it did most people, and she was quite prepared to like the doctor's sister; so on reaching "The Towers" Grace was cordially received.

"I am glad that the doctor has allowed you to come over to me, and it is very good of you to come," said Beatrice.

"Anyone would be upset," said Grace, "at so strange a thing happening; but I am very pleased to help my brother, and when I know you better, Miss

Ballantyne, I think that I shall also be pleased to help you."

Beatrice looked at her visitor, for the last part of her remark was not exactly what most girls would have said.

"You are very fond of your brother, Miss Strong?"

"Certainly I am, and have good cause to be," replied Grace.

Beatrice smiled, but said nothing. "If I had only a brother," she thought, "how different things would be."

Grace read her thoughts, and said, "I fear that I am too impulsive; but my brother and myself have been more like chums than brother and sister. We have worked together, and studied together, and suffered together, and he has always been good and thoughtful, and I don't think that I could love anyone better than I do the doctor."

"He has a very kind manner, and you cannot help feeling that he is skilful. He has taken a great deal of trouble over this unfortunate affair of Mr Dorset's," said Beatrice.

"I would not trouble about that," said Grace cheerfully, "there may be an explanation of it which will clear up the whole matter. At any rate do not let us think of it until my brother returns from Sydney."

"Who are the people living in this neighbourhood?" asked Beatrice, changing the subject.

"They mostly belong to two classes," said Grace: "those who are comparatively poor and those who are rich. The larger houses, you see, are all of them the homes of fairly well-to-do people; but the fishermen and labouring classes are wretchedly poor."

"I thought that there were no poor people in Australia," said Beatrice, smiling.

"A very common mistake which we English people often make," said Grace.

"Then you are English?" said Beatrice eagerly.

"I am," said Grace; "but really I don't know that I am any the better for that. Some of the nicest people I have known are Australians."

"Tell me about your life in England, and how you came out here," said Beatrice, after Lucy had brought in afternoon tea.

"It is a sad story," said Grace.

"Then I think it may suit me, for I seem to be under a grey sky just now myself," said Beatrice.

"It is not all grey," replied Grace; "if sad, it is a story made bright and interesting because there is a good man in it."

"That, of course, is your brother," said Beatrice, smiling.

"Yes," said Grace gravely; "he is very unlike many men and many brothers. But remember, Miss Ballantyne, you asked me to tell you about my life at home."

Dr Strong might well think highly of his sister Grace. She was a contrast in many ways to Beatrice. By the side of the ripe, full-orbed beauty of the mistress of "The Towers," her face looked thin, and her whole form seemed wanting in the round fullness of early womanhood; but it was a face to arrest attention.

Her dark, almost black hair was seemingly not over abundant; but her eyes, and perfect nose, and lips might have been taken as a model by a painter, who wished to reproduce the features of the Mary that Jesus loved.

Her eyes suggested unusual fluency of speech, as may be partly gathered from what follows.

She sat on a low chair and looked into the fire, with now and again a tear glistening behind the eyelashes, as she told Beatrice the story of her early life.

"Steynbridge is, without doubt, one of the most old-fashioned towns in the south of England. It is one of those quiet clusters of English homes which the hand of the old destroyer, Time, seems here and

there to spare, just to remind us, I suppose, of old-world scenes and customs. I have heard my father say that from the time he was a boy he could remember comparatively few changes. The old canal had given way to the more modern railway, and a new brewery had entered into competition with the old. But, except for these changes, and a few brick houses of more pretentious style, which had gone up stealthily in the suburbs, I can remember little or no perceptible change since I first knew the place. There had been two thousand people there as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember.

"If I close my eyes, the old town comes back to me as fresh as ever. From the sleepy railway-station in Blair Street, past the high brick wool stores, past the blacksmith's forge, a row of cottages led straight to the market-place, where, at various points of the compass, the 'Blue Boar,' and 'White Hart,' and 'Red Lion' hostelries swung their creaking signs of invitation.

"Old-fashioned, substantial, red-brick houses were most of them, with great black oaken joists and beams intersecting the outer walls, and a 'house place,' as the kitchen was called, with a chimney corner big enough to roast an ox, seats on each side of the inglenook, and a chimney wide and straight, up which might easily be described a goodly number of stars.

"Various businesses had, in several instances, passed for generations from father to son. There had been a well-to-do Quaker grocer next door to the White Hart Inn for generations; and Lukin the tailor at one corner, and Annersley at the other, were institutions. The Browns, however, were the most conspicuous portion of the community. The name was to be seen above almost every fourth shop front, and only that the name and trade were usually linked together the confusion might have been extreme. The use of terms such as 'Painter Brown,' 'Butcher

Brown,' and 'Baker Brown,' etc., preserved the identity of the inhabitants.

"My father's house was at the country end of High Street, and had an old-fashioned garden around it, where the lilac, and laburnum, and crimson hawthorn scented the air in spring-time, and cabbage roses, and pinks, and tulips, and scores of other old favourite garden flowers flourished in the summer. There was a copse of nut trees, and an orchard, and several acres of pasture-land, which could be flooded from the brook in the spring-time, and which, I need scarcely say, bore luxuriant crops of fragrant hay.

"The house, although quite within the suburbs of the town, was known by the singular name of 'Abbeyhurst.' It was a queer, rambling place. Part of it was very old, and if the stories told about it were correct, as indeed I have good reason to believe they were, it had been at one time a monastery, probably one of the smaller ecclesiastical establishments which were abolished by Henry VIII. in 1536. You remember how the king, with the strong and willing aid of Thomas Cromwell, attacked these monasteries which then studded the land. But bad as the monastic system was, and ignorant and licentious as were many of the ecclesiastics, it was a great shock to England when they were overthrown; and, looking at the stained glass and delicate stonework of a side door in the old part of 'Abbeyhurst,' I, even as a girl, used to read with regretful interest of how, during the suppression of the monasteries, 'piles of delicate stonework, enriched with the thoughts of architect and sculptor, which ever since the Conquest had been growing up in beauty over all the land, were levelled, unroofed, or turned into stables and pigsties'; of how 'choice pictures, in whose tinted forms glowed the spirit of Italian art, shrivelled in the flames, and stained windows became splinters of coloured glass, and sweet bells, that had laden the

air at prime and sunset with music, were melted down and sold.'

" I fancy ' Abbeyhurst ' was repaired, and had been a sort of scholastic establishment after that, for on the east wall, in one of the attics, the names of either monks or schoolboys had been found scratched with a knife or other sharp instrument upon the plaster, which at some later time had been papered over. The old place must have had a great knocking about, too, in 1643, when Oliver Cromwell had a skirmish with Prince Rupert at King's Bromley, and brought the parliamentary cannon to bear upon the town. There were chippings and scars upon the stone cornices and brickwork of the eastern wall of the house, which I often looked at, and which our old gardener stoutly averred were the marks of the stern soldiers' cannon-balls.

" However, the place had been almost entirely re-built since then, the architect having in some measure preserved the old-fashioned character of the house, and incorporated in the new building all that was worth preserving of the old. This included the whole eastern side of the house, containing about six rooms in the three stories, and the passage leading to the doorway with the stained-glass window above, which I have previously referred to. If my memory is not at fault there was worked into the design of that coloured window the date ' Anno Domini 1423.' "

Beatrice listened to all this with interest, for it was evident that her visitor was gifted wih uncommon skill in story-telling, and she was interested, too, in the narrative on account of the doctor; then, too, she had a girl friend who had lived at Steynbridge.

" Am I tiring you? " asked Grace.

" Not in the least," replied Beatrice. " Go on, please, I am deeply interested. I have heard about Steynbridge before, but never had such a graphic description of it."

" Dr Strong is my only brother," continued Grace,

resuming her narrative, "but I have two sisters older than myself. My father was a tall, thoughtful man, a doctor immersed in his profession; but a private income saved him from being altogether dependent upon it. I scarcely know how to describe my mother. The grave closed above her several years ago; but I often imagine her gentle, loving eyes still fixed upon me. She was the household angel of 'Abbeyhurst.'

"I have read somewhere that the memory of childhood is eclectic, and that in after years the heart turns fondly to the scenes and memories of earlier days; it must be so in my case. But if there be such a golden haze as this about my recollection of my mother, I would not have it altered. To my brother and myself, at any rate, our mother was:

> "'A perfect woman, nobly planned,
> To warn, to comfort, and command;
> And yet a spirit still and bright,
> With something of an angel light.'

"While our mother lived our home life was almost as perfectly happy as it could be; but she died suddenly, and about twelve months afterward my father married again. Things, after a while, became very different at home: my two older sisters married, and John and myself decided to come out to Australia. I told you, I think, that we had always been chums."

CHAPTER XIII

MORE COMPLICATIONS

The latter portion of Grace Strong's story was full of pathetic interest to Beatrice, for the steamer in which they left England was burnt during a stormy night in the English Channel.

The brother and sister would not, however, return to their friends, but as soon as possible had proceeded again upon their journey, and after a series of somewhat unusual adventures, in which, as narrated by his sister, Dr Strong appeared to excellent advantage, they reached Sydney. Here, however, their troubles were to commence rather than finish.

"Sydney is no place for poor people," said Grace, and although she touched lightly upon their struggles and privations, it was evident that they had passed patiently through a good many. The doctor's difficulties with fellow practitioners and professional etiquette were hinted at, and it was clear to Beatrice that the brother and sister had fought a good fight with many difficulties before they found themselves in the comparatively prosperous circumstances in which they then were.

The time passed quickly, and Beatrice felt herself much drawn to Grace, and probably had she known her longer would have confided to her some of her own troubles; for she was now greatly alarmed as to the consequences of her own conduct in regard to the disappearance of Septimus Dorset. But while

prepared to make a friend of Grace, she determined that it was too late to take her into her confidence. She would let things take their course, and see whether the detectives, who, she felt sure, must be brought into the affair, would make any discovery.

"I am so pleased to have heard your story, Miss Strong," she said. "I feel now as though I had known you and your brother for years. I had a school friend, a Miss Dasby, who lived at Steynbridge."

Grace remembered Miss Dasby well, and told Beatrice much about her home and friends that interested her.

They were talking together when two vehicles drew up at the entrance hall. Looking out they saw the doctor's gig, and in another vehicle was Mr Dorset's brother and two detectives.

An hour after their arrival Beatrice was on her way with Grace and her maid to spend the night at "Steynbridge Cottage," as the doctor's residence was named.

It was evident that she could be of no assistance to them, and Dr Strong thought it advisable for Miss Ballantyne's health, and nerves, and general well-being, that she should not remain for that night at "The Towers."

Beatrice at first objected to the arrangement, but the doctor was firm and decided.

"You must allow me to settle this matter for you, Miss Ballantyne. After what happened here last night, it is evident to me that a change away from this big sombre place will do you good. Grace will take care of you and make you very comfortable, and I will remain here to-night with Mr Dorset and Detective Bruce and his fellow-officer. Besides, we have arranged for Mr Broadford to come over and consult with us, and we hope by the morning to give you some solution of the mystery of Mr Septimus Dorset's disappearance."

Later on the doctor and Donald Dorset, with the two detectives, were at dinner in the large dining-room of "The Towers." The two latter had not been idle, but so far they had obtained no clue.

Dr Strong had assumed the place of host, and, with the easy familiarity and self-confidence natural to the medical profession, was doing the honours of the house.

The men adjourned to the conservatory after dinner to smoke and further discuss the situation, and here Mr Broadford joined them.

"What do you think of it, Mr Bruce?" asked Dr Strong, addressing the senior police officer.

"Not much so far," said Bruce laconically.

"Do you think he left the house by himself?" asked the doctor.

"No, I don't," replied the officer.

"Mr Dorset," he said, turning round suddenly to the missing man's brother, "do you know whether your brother has any special friends or particular enemies in this neighbourhood?"

"No," said the gentleman addressed; "to my knowledge he knew no one out here except the late Mr Ballantyne, who was a client of his firm. But it is impossible that he can have left the house of his own free will without his clothes."

"Then you have nothing to suggest to us?" said the second detective.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," said Mr Dorset despondently.

"Do you think he was in the habit of walking in his sleep?" asked the clergyman.

"No, certainly not; at least, I never knew him to do such a thing," answered his brother.

"Why do you ask that question, sir?" asked Detective Bruce, leaning forward and looking at the clergyman.

"Because during one part of the night I thought that I heard a slight noise in the room."

"What was it like?" asked the detective, displaying interest.

"As though he was up and moving about," said the minister.

"Well, that may have been so, and he might afterwards have gone to bed again," said the doctor.

"You did not go in nor look in?" said the detective.

"No, certainly not," replied Mr Broadford.

There was a long pause after this, which was at last broken by the doctor. "We want to find out *something* before we can do much," he said.

"You mean a *motive*," said the senior detective.

"Yes, that's it," replied the doctor. "You see, if a crime has been committed, there must, under the circumstances, have been a motive for it. If a burglar broke in and absconded with the person and property of the missing man it would have been robbery."

"If he had been a suitor for Miss Ballantyne's hand the motive might have been jealousy," said Detective Bruce.

At this the junior detective looked curiously across at Mr Broadford and asked him if any other person had been with Miss Ballantyne and himself the previous night, except Mr Dorset.

They all saw the awkwardness of the clergyman's position, for no matter how innocent the occasion, or how simple the explanation of their having been detained there by a storm, the facts remained that the two gentlemen were being entertained by Miss Ballantyne, and that both were bachelors who might have been suitors for the hand of a wealthy young lady; that both slept in the house that night in adjoining rooms; and that in the morning one was missing.

"Are there any wells about the place?" asked Donald Dorset.

No one knew "The Towers" well enough to inform him, so William was called in and questioned, but

he knew of none; the house, he said, was well supplied with underground tanks.

Mr Broadford excused himself early, and Mr Donald Dorset also left for town, and that night the two detectives occupied the room from which Septimus Dorset had disappeared. The doctor was to occupy the adjoining dressing-room, but before any of them thought of sleep, they long and anxiously discussed the situation.

The younger officer, whose name was Seymour, had become possessed with the idea that Mr Broadford knew more of the matter than he cared to say. In fact, he practically let it out that had he been the senior, he would have cautioned him not to incriminate himself, and probably by that time would have had him under arrest.

"And a great fool you would have made of yourself," said the doctor bluntly; at which Detective Bruce indulged in a hearty and sympathetic laugh.

"I confess that I am altogether beaten so far," said Detective Bruce; "but you are very green in love-affairs, Seymour. Do you think that a clergyman, at so short a notice, would have murdered a rival in that fashion?"

"Do not be too certain," replied Seymour. "It is very evident that Mr Broadford thinks very well of Miss Ballantyne; clergymen, too, think that they have a first claim upon the affections of rich and handsome women. Suppose that he fell in love at first sight, and that he had some dispute about Miss Ballantyne with Mr Dorset, and that in sudden heat he struck him?"

"It won't do, Seymour," said the doctor, laughing. "I know Christopher Broadford pretty well, and I am confident that he knows no more about this affair than we do ourselves."

However, Detective Seymour was by no means persuaded. "Who else is there, then, that could have spirited him away?" he asked.

"Did you ever hear of one Owen Skinner, and of a lady named Mrs Dalbert?" asked the doctor.

A fire of coal and wood was burning brightly in the grate, and all three men looked at it in silence for half a minute after this speech of Dr Strong's.

"Go on," said Detective Bruce.

"Now what I am going to tell you, you must take for exactly what it is worth. It was told me by an old woman on her deathbed, who had lived in this house as a laundress during the time of the late Mr Ballantyne, and while he was away."

"Why do you say that we must take it for what it is worth?" asked Seymour.

"Because the woman was in great pain at the time of telling it, and may not have been properly accountable for what she was saying. She thought herself under an obligation to me, and told it as a great secret; but there may be nothing at all in it."

"Don't tax our curiosity unnecessarily," said Bruce.

"Well, this is it," replied the doctor. "To make a long story short, she told me that there was a gold-mine under 'Storm-Cliff Towers,' and that there was a way into it from Mr Ballantyne's bedroom—which, by the by, is the very room we are now sitting in."

Detective Seymour started up as though he were about to commence a search at once; but Bruce sat still and watched the doctor closely.

"Why did you not tell us this before, doctor?"

"Simply because, in a case of this sort, I only give information to an officer of the police force as a last resort; and, further, I have searched every room in the house myself and have met with no confirmation of old Sarah's statement. Once only I thought that I had hit upon something; but I fear that it was nothing worth following up. But I have only told you a part of the story."

"By all means tell us the rest of it, doctor," said the detective.

"Sarah had been a sort of confidential servant at 'The Towers'; but she took bad with a complication of disorders, amongst which was dropsy, shortly before Mr Ballantyne's death. I was then on the visiting staff of the Sydney Hospital, and this old creature happened to be in my ward. Knowing that she was from Storm-Cliff I probably paid some special attention to her, for she told me her secret with the idea that she was conferring upon me a lasting benefit. The old woman was, of course, very ignorant, and had an idea that, being a doctor, I was free to go anywhere, and that, if I should be called upon to attend Mr Ballantyne at any time, I might get a few handfuls of nuggets for myself from his hidden store.

"She had a great dislike to Skinner; not that it was always so, but he had done something to offend her. She assured me that Skinner made no secret about the mine, for she had known him to carry hundreds of bags of earth up from it, especially during the years Mr Ballantyne was absent on his travels, and that he had taken out the earth while he was searching for the gold.

"She further told me that there must be a way down to it, also, from the lower tower room, as she had once or twice seen him come from there with bags of stuff—that's the North Tower, you know—but it seems he was angry with her if she watched him, and said that he was getting ready to cement the floors on account of rats. It never occurred to me until now, but if a large quantity of earth were removed in the way she said it was, there should be some inequality somewhere about the grounds where it was deposited; but so far as we can see there is none."

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNSHARED SECRET

THE night passed without incident, and the morning brought no new discovery. The carpet was taken up from the lower tower room, but no fresh light was thrown upon the affair, nor was the old woman's story corroborated by the finding of any mounds of earth which might have accumulated as the result of the suggested excavations. The detectives, however, remained and examined the country around "The Towers" in all directions, but found no clue.

The mystery of the lawyer's disappearance soon got into the papers; a considerable reward was offered for any information which might lead to his discovery, and some of the society journals hinted at a scandal, and that he might readily have been found, not twenty miles from Sydney, if certain people wished it. It was indeed suggested by a journal circulating in Sydney, although not published there, that there were high officials in the Government departments who knew of Septimus Dorset's whereabouts, but who found it convenient to be silent. Of course vague innuendoes of this sort can never be answered, nor can the originators of them be brought to punishment, as they richly deserve to be.

There was no disputing the fact, however, among those who really knew. The police were baffled; the friends of the missing man were in great distress at his disappearance; and to complicate matters, the

mistress of "Storm-Cliff Towers" lay ill in "Steynbridge Cottage."

Nothing preys more upon the heart than the possession of a secret which is associated with a crime. The person possessing the knowledge may be perfectly innocent, or may have been guilty of indiscretion only, or may have obtained the knowledge by accident or mistake; but it makes little difference. The secret of a crime undisclosed has, in countless instances, warped the whole vision of life, and placed its possessors under disastrous disabilities. The difficulty of such a position is increased with every new circumstance and each passing day. It is an incubus upon the mind, which feeds upon its own fears, and grows until it fills the whole horizon of vision and absolutely monopolises the life. The burden of a secret shared with a faithful friend may be harmless to the individual, but unshared, it may be a canker corroding the life. It was this which had brought about Beatrice's illness, which, at the present juncture, baffled the medical skill of Dr Strong.

The position as it presented itself to Beatrice was this:

She had experimented with a man's life for the sake of obtaining further knowledge of the mysterious room in "The Towers." What she had seen in that room could not have been a dream; it was real. Her uncle's memorandum in regard to the wearer of the cat's-eye ring dispelled any thought of its having been an imagination of her mind. She had seen the hand of the wearer of the ring before she had known of the existence of such a person or such a ring from other sources.

She longed to give the doctor some hint that might assist them in the search, but when an opportunity to tell him came, she shrank from doing so.

Her position was embarrassed, too, by the disappearance of her lawyer, for he possessed a knowledge of her affairs which would have been specially

serviceable. Her distress and worry, and nursing of her unshared secret, and fear that by some means she might unwittingly disclose it, had worked together upon her mind and culminated in its natural consequences, and for several weeks, during which the search was continued, Miss Ballantyne could render no assistance.

In the meantime the position of things at "The Towers" was peculiar. The illness of Miss Ballantyne and the disappearance of the lawyer left the practical direction of affairs in the hands of Dr Strong, who was interested in the matter out of all proportion to its professional value to him.

He felt sure that Beatrice had something on her mind. Grace had told him of expressions of fear about "The Towers," which had escaped Miss Ballantyne's lips in the delirium of fever; and although it was natural that the shock of Mr Dorset's disappearance should have caused such an illness, the doctor's suspicions that there was something underhand about the mansion and its cemented floors grew upon him, and he visited the place as much as his professional duties made possible.

After a month Miss Ballantyne was convalescent and still resident at "Steynbridge Cottage," when one evening Dr Strong found himself traversing the now familiar path from the cottage to the "The Towers." He had determined to remain there for the night alone in the haunted chamber, and see if it was not possible to learn something of the mystery which threatened to make "The Towers" no longer habitable to ordinary residents. Beatrice had emphatically stated that she would not again live in the place, and the servants reported noises in the night at the north end of the mansion, and could only be induced to remain in the place at all on account of their attachment to their mistress.

Dr Strong was both courageous and of iron nerve, and he had set himself to spend one night alone in

the chamber and see if anything would result. He had not told either his sister or Beatrice of his intentions, nor did the servants at "The Towers" know of his coming. He had intimated to the former that he had a case to attend and might be detained late.

Evening was closing in as he entered the grounds and met William, with Leo the mastiff, having a look around before closing up the place for the night.

William's first inquiry was after the health of Miss Ballantyne, and on being assured that she was progressing favourably and would soon be about again, he commenced to talk about "The Towers."

"The people in Australia are worse than folks in the old country, doctor," he said.

"How's that, William?"

"Oh! I mean in trespassing upon property. Would you believe it, just now, sir, I turned a party of young chaps off the lower lawn this afternoon, who had just fixed up their wickets to play cricket here. They coolly told me that they had played there before without being interfered with, and they were not going to move for me. Wanted me to drink a drop of whisky with them, and take long stop, as they were short of a man."

"What did you do?" asked the doctor, laughing.

"I went up and brought down the gardener and the mastiff, and we cleared them out."

"You see, there is so much open ground and so many broken and shaky fences around this neighbourhood, that people have a very faint notion as to the right of occupation or trespass," replied the doctor.

"That's all very well; but our fences are all right, and they not only trespass upon the grounds, but they damage the place, and steal the fruit and timber, unless you are always upon the watch. They come, too, in the night-time. I think, doctor, the young mistress ought to have a keeper about the place at

night. I shall be real glad when we are all safely back in the old land again."

Dinner was served to the doctor alone, and he informed the housemaid that he would stop for the night and sleep in the big bedroom in the north wing.

"By the way, Mary, as I am to occupy that end of the house by myself, I think that I might as well have Leo with me; tell the gardener to bring him along."

The clock had struck ten when Dr Strong settled himself down in the chamber from which Septimus Dorset had disappeared. A fire burnt brightly in the room. He sat back from the hearthrug, however, for the fire had been placed there more for company and general comfort than for warmth. By his side the mastiff lay at rest, and on the table, within easy reach of his hand, was a revolver.

He was not sleepy, but sat calmly thinking out a score of tangled circumstances, which he felt wanted an hour or two of reflection to set straight.

First in his thoughts came Beatrice; he had seen a good deal of her during her illness, had seen her when a woman appears to least advantage, in hours of bodily weakness and pain, and depression of spirits. How calm and resolute she had been in suffering; how well she had held herself in check.

"Just the woman I have wished for, and dreamt about as a wife," he said to himself. "She will soon be well again, but this place worries her; if I could get her confidence and relieve her, and for the sake of love, even though it were not returned, or in any way rewarded, I would help her if I could."

Then he recalled his own early life in company with his brave-hearted sister; he reminded himself of his first settlement at Storm-Cliff, of his first thoughts of Raymond Ballantyne and Owen Skinner, and what he had heard of Mrs Dalbert. There had been queer stories of Raymond Ballantyne: of his domestic habits, of his tendency to fall asleep at

untimely seasons; how he had been known to play for hours upon the organ in a state of semi-consciousness. Could it be possible that he was asleep, then?

Then the thought arose in his mind as to how Raymond Ballantyne came to commit suicide. Was there any want of truthfulness on the part of the witness who bore testimony to having seen him jump from, or slip off the rocks. Darker thoughts came into the picture. Had Owen Skinner or Mrs Dalbert any interest in his death? Were they benefited by it? Had Skinner aught to do with the disappearance of Septimus Dorset? If so, what benefit could it be to him?"

His thoughts were at this point when he was startled. The mastiff was growling, as it were, below his breath. The doctor had heard no sound, saw no movement; but the dog, who lay with his nose upon the floor, growled again.

CHAPTER XV

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

Dr Strong sat back in his chair and peered cautiously about the room.

What was the dog growling at?

He had a theory that animals see more than is visible to human eyes, and this seemed now to be corroborated, for suddenly the dog drew back, cringing as though threatened by a ghostly hand, and crouched nearer to the doctor. The huge animal visibly shivered and then whined. There was no mistaking it; whether it was afraid of something at present invisible, but something which he scented, or whether the dog saw more than the doctor, the animal was evidently afraid, for it turned its eyes up to those of Dr Strong in pleading entreaty, and then stood up trembling all over.

It was the mute appeal of a dumb animal suggestive of fear and readiness for flight.

The doctor felt a chill go through him, but placed his hand reassuringly on the dog's head, at which he sat down upon his haunches and gazed again in the direction of the fireplace, where a few coals still gave out a feeble glow.

It was nearly half-past eleven o'clock. Several minutes passed without a sound; the apprehension of the dog had, to some extent, seized hold of the doctor, and he held the revolver nervously in his hand while he gazed around the room.

Suddenly a whimper from the dog again arrested his attention, and looking over toward the fire, he saw the great square hearth and fireplace slowly sinking below the level of the bedroom floor.

Motioning to the dog, he stepped noiselessly back across the thick carpet to a large, old-fashioned bay-window where heavy curtains provided a convenient hiding-place. The dog seemed instinctively to know that it was advisable to get behind cover, and in less time than it takes to write it, the two were sheltered at the back of the damask curtains.

The revolver was in the doctor's right hand.

"Some devilry, this!" was all that he softly ejaculated, as he saw the fireplace and square still slowly descending, until at last it was out of sight, leaving only visible, from where the doctor stood, a large cavity.

Several things had thus far impressed themselves upon the solitary beholder of this strange scene. There had been no noise. Whatever mechanism it was that worked this extraordinary lift, it must be finely finished and perfected.

"Here is a clue to the disappearance of Septimus Dorset, and a corroboration of Sarah's story," thought the doctor. "Whether there is a gold-mine or not, there is certainly something under the place, and this secret lift has been constructed by a clever man, probably a scoundrel, for a purpose."

His thoughts were arrested by the appearance, from out of the cavity, of the back of a man's head, and Dr Strong grasped the revolver with a nervous grip as he peered between the curtains.

It was a stoutish man, sitting in a rocking-chair, with his face turned toward the dead embers of the fireplace.

The figure sat perfectly motionless, and in the dim light of the room (for the lamp had been lowered by the doctor), it was impossible to make out more than that the hands were clasped in front of him, and

that one leg was lifted so as to rest across the knee of the other.

Half an hour must have passed—half an hour of exquisite torture for Dr Strong—during which time the figure showed no sign of life or motion. Who was it that thus courted destruction, for the doctor's finger was on the trigger a score of times, ready to send a bullet through the man's head. Again and again he was on the point of coming out of his hiding-place and grappling with the man in the chair; but with an iron will he restrained himself.

It struck him that the size of the figure very much resembled that of the late Raymond Ballantyne.

Then the thought came to him of Mr Ballantyne having been known to some as "Raymond the Sleeper." The man in the chair looked very much as though he were asleep. It was strange, he thought, that the dog should be so quiet. Was it because the thing in front of him was dead?

Then the idea flashed upon him that this was the body of the dead Raymond Ballantyne, preserved by some process known to Skinner or some confederate, and that he was projected into this chamber in this extraordinary fashion, in order that anyone seeing it might be terrified, and proclaim "The Towers" haunted by the ghost of its late proprietor.

But the ghostly thing still made no sign, and at last Dr Strong, unable to restrain himself longer, stepped into the middle of the room, the dog following him with evident reluctance.

He caught a glimpse for a moment of an ashy-white, dead face, and then noticed the great square slowly settling down again below the surface of the room. What should he do? Fire and arouse the household, or jump upon the descending lift and see for himself what there was below. He had only a moment to decide, and at once chose the latter alternative.

He sprang lightly down, revolver in hand, at the

back of the descending figure, which quickly reached the ground floor below.

In a moment, however, he regretted his rashness, for an unseen hand suddenly wrenched the revolver from his grasp, and a savage blow felled him half senseless to the ground.

It seemed but a moment, when the faint light above was suddenly blotted out in darkness. The lift had evidently returned to its accustomed position.

Not a gleam of light was visible; the darkness was so intense that one might almost feel it like a solid substance. The doctor placed his hand upon the floor; it felt like earth or gravel to the touch. But there was no sound to be heard, although he listened with strained attention for the slightest noise.

Nothing was to be heard, however, around or in the room above. The smell of the place seemed to him faint and unwholesome.

"What a fool I was to take a leap like this in the dark," he thought. But he made no movement and spoke no word, for he felt that the slightest indication of his whereabouts to an adversary might be followed by a pistol-shot or death-dealing blow. Then, suddenly, he felt himself being bound with strong cords, while another held him. Then a long silence . . . after that unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DOCTOR CAN'T BE FOUND

THERE was great commotion when it was discovered on the following morning that Dr Strong was missing. At first it amounted almost to a panic, and the whole of the servants were on the point of leaving.

They had been awakened early in the morning by the barking of the mastiff, but beyond sniffing around the room, and especially around the fireplace, the movements of the dog gave no clue whatever to what had happened during the night.

As soon as the news got out about Storm-Cliff, the whole neighbourhood was thrown into a state of unparalleled excitement; the question of these disappearances, and especially that of Dr Strong, were discussed by men who had not spoken to each other for years.

Grace was well-nigh frantic as to what had happened to her brother, and commenced a systematic search for some trace of his whereabouts, and yet managed to keep the terrible tidings a secret from Beatrice.

There was a great stir in the city on the matter being made public in the papers, for both Septimus Dorset and Dr Strong were fairly well-known men, and as the result of the newspaper paragraphs, crowds flocked out during the week to see "The Towers."

The account given by one leading Sydney journal was as follows:

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"During the past few days there have been two very singular and unaccountable disappearances of well-known citizens from the residence of the late Mr Raymond Ballantyne at Storm-Cliff. The place, which is a fine and spacious stone mansion, is well-known as 'The Towers,' and has recently come into the possession of a niece of the late owner.

"It will be remembered by some of our readers that quite recently Mr Septimus Dorset, of a well-known firm of city solicitors, was staying for the night at 'Storm-Cliff Towers,' having been called out there on business connected with his profession. He slept in a large room at the northern end of the mansion, but in the morning, although his clothes and money and jewellery were found where he had placed them before retiring to rest, the gentleman was missing. No one was sleeping in the same room with him, and every effort has since been made, both by the detective department and his own friends, to discover some trace of him, without success.

"This has naturally caused his friends much distress and anxiety, and it seems that Dr Strong, who had attended Miss Ballantyne, the present owner, through a dangerous illness—the result of a shock caused by this misadventure—had specially set himself to elucidate the mystery.

"On the evening of the 1st instant it transpired that the doctor decided to spend the night alone in the very chamber from which his friend had disappeared, hoping thereby to obtain some clue.

"Unfortunately he did not acquaint any member of his family of his intention, or they might have dissuaded him; but pleading a professional engagement which was likely to detain him during the greater portion of the night, he reached 'The Towers' about sundown, and acquainted the servants of his intention.

It should be said that since Miss Ballantyne's illness and the disappearance of her solicitor, Mr Septimus Dorset, the oversight of the servants at 'The Towers' had been practically in Dr Strong's hands.

"The coachman and gardener both offered to keep the doctor company, but he insisted upon the house being closed up as usual for the night, and with a powerful mastiff dog and a revolver, Dr Strong entered the room, and was there seen for the last time.

"A fire had been lit to air the apartment and a lamp was lighted by one of the servants, but of what transpired during the night, none save the dog have any knowledge, and unfortunately the animal has not been able to indicate any source from which an explanation might be obtained.

"Early in the morning he was heard barking, and the household being aroused, the room, and house, and grounds were carefully searched, but no clue to the doctor's singular disappearance could be discovered. The dog seemed nervous and could only be induced to enter the room again with difficulty. A careful examination of the apartment made yesterday by an expert detective who had for some weeks been engaged upon the strange case of Mr Septimus Dorset, suggested a clue which the officers hope may lead to something. Hairs of the dog were found behind the curtains of a large bay-window, and also footprints supposed to have been made by the feet of Dr Strong. If so, it is surmised that the doctor may have been watching the room for some time from behind the curtains, in which case the probability is that he was watching someone who had entered surreptitiously. It is known that the doctor was armed, but no shot could have been fired, and there is no sign whatever of any struggle.

"The friends of the doctor have been thrown into the greatest distress by his mysterious disappearance. That there has been foul play seems certain, for he went to 'The Towers' avowedly to spend the night in

the haunted chamber, and asked for the dog to be brought for company and protection. It is impossible that he can have left the place willingly or by ordinary means, for the doors of the room were found locked on the inside, and a door had to be forced before an entrance could be effected.

"The whole affair is enshrouded in the deepest mystery, and some extraordinary theories are current among strong believers in the supernatural, for it is asked how was it that no shot was fired by the doctor in self-defence; and also, how it was that the dog seems to have lent him no assistance? Had there been a struggle the dog would certainly have assisted, and the room must have shown some sign of it; but the place was found in perfect order: the bed had not been slept in, and not a single article of the doctor's was found in the room.

"There must, of course, be a solution, but the difficulty is to know in what quarter to look for it. We have made but very little comment in the matter of Mr Dorset's disappearance because we have been anxious not to hamper the detectives who have the matter in hand; but there should now be the utmost effort made to probe the mystery and find out whether these men have been murdered, or by what means they have been removed. Any explanation suggested in regard to Mr Dorset's disappearance will scarcely apply to Dr Strong, for until the last few weeks he has been a perfect stranger to all those who are interested in 'The Towers' property. The safety of the individual in the Australian colonies has been one of our proudest boasts, and we cannot see our public men spirited away in this fashion without urging the police authorities to use every endeavour to at once clear up the mystery, and remove any feeling of apprehension and insecurity from the public mind."

CHAPTER XVII

MRS DALBERT AGAIN

A WOMAN of any age from thirty to forty-five who considers that her life has been a failure, and who is on the look-out for some chance, even at that late hour, to make it a success, is a dangerous person to be brought in contact with.

As drowning men clutch at straws, or other possible or impossible saviours, so does such a woman clutch at circumstances. She may wreck a hundred lives, but she will take the risk with perfect indifference. What does it matter to her if a hundred or a thousand fail or go under if she only comes out on top.

She exaggerates her misfortunes, holds her successes and advantages lightly; she has a grudge against the world, and all creation, if necessary or possible, must pay the penalty.

Nor does marriage satisfy many women of this ambitious stamp, especially when the marriage relations have been regarded by the outside world as having fallen short of expectations. There are some women whose chief aim in life is to enter the haven of connubial bliss with a suitable partner. If he turns out unsuitable or unsatisfactory they still feel that they have reached the goal. If left widows they have at any rate succeeded where many others have failed.

But the woman referred to takes little account of having been married. If the marriage has not come

up to her ideal, she frets herself at having failed to reach the summit aspired to, and the consequence is a restless, dissatisfied, and over-weaning selfish life.

We must not, however, be too severe in our estimate of such a woman as was Mrs Dalbert. She had been brought up in comparative luxury, had spent her early life in a round of alternative pleasure and disappointment, had married a man totally unsuited to her temperament, had lived a short, loveless, and childless married life, and had been early left a widow, with brilliant but comparatively uncultivated talents, and a meagre fortune. Her meeting in India with her cousin, Raymond Ballantyne, had opened up a new prospect for her; but it was distance lent enchantment to the view, and on the morning following the disappearance of Dr Strong, she sat reading a letter in a room of a handsome house in a Sydney suburb with an expression of countenance the reverse of tranquil.

The letter was from Owen Skinner, and read as follows:

"Dear Meta,—The fates are unfortunately still against us. It seemed to me that after legal matters had been adjusted, a few months should have put everything right, but now a medical question has unfortunately intruded itself, with results which at present I find it difficult to see the end of. However, you know that I am careful of speech and sometimes talk in parables, so you will do well to keep yourself fully conversant with modern literature.—Yours, etc.,

"Owen Skinner.

"P.S. Shall await your advice."

"The fool!" ejaculated Mrs Dalbert, when she had perused and re-perused the letter. "He is very cautious and fearful of committing himself. I suppose that reference to literature means that I am to

look through the newspaper carefully; there is evidently something happening at 'The Towers.'"

"Mabel," she called to her attendant and companion, "run downstairs and bring up the paper."

She took it eagerly from the girl, saying, "I shall not want anything for a while," and walked over with much deliberation to the window and drew up an easy-chair.

What a consummate actress she was! She knew full well that the letter was a warning; that something serious must have occurred for Owen Skinner to have written to her. She guessed that she was wanted, and every nerve in her body was tingling with excitement, and yet she carried herself, before her companion, with all the composure and outward calm conceivable.

Her eyes soon caught the paragraph about the disappearance of Dr Strong, and she read it with the closest attention. Occasionally she stopped her reading and gazed across the street in front of her, but she saw nothing. Her thoughts were with the tragedy which imagination conjured up before her at Storm-Cliff. Not that she valued life particularly, but there were reasons why she dreaded the consequences of Owen Skinner's act. If Dr Strong was still alive, she would do her best to save him from the fate of Raymond Ballantyne and possibly Septimus Dorset. The doctor had blundered into a snare; what gain to them for him to pay the penalty? Then, however, the thought flashed across her mind, "Dead men tell no tales." But what if he were discovered dead?

Her hesitation was momentary, however. She determined to save the doctor's life if not too late.

"Mabel, I am going out, and possibly may not return until to-morrow."

The girl was a country-bred lass, who had been engaged as a companion and attendant; she had learnt

the advisability of asking no questions of her mistress on occasions such as the present.

She assisted Mrs Dalbert to dress, which, although she guessed that a man's life was at stake, Mrs Dalbert did with the greatest care and deliberation.

There was a finish about Mrs Dalbert when she was ready to go out, which both pleased and interested her companion. She was the most perfectly dressed woman that Mabel had ever known. It was not a surface elegance or exterior finish either, for every garment she wore was, in style and finish, perfect of its kind. Not that the material was specially costly, but it was the make and style. Mabel thought it was the outcome of good family and high breeding. No woman that she had ever seen could give her skirts the dainty swing of Mrs Dalbert.

But it was not culture or high breeding to which Mrs Dalbert owed this elegance of style; she was an artist in the matter of dress, and her whole gait, and deportment, and bearing, bore witness to it.

Nor was the dress of Mrs Dalbert without significance in its general bearing upon her character. The guiding principle of her life was "good taste." It was not the moral value of an action so much as how it would appear to outsiders. Her standard of right and wrong was lost sight of when the question of appearances came in. If a thing could be made to appear right, it was right, and she had so trained her mind and schooled herself by habit, that good taste had become her rule of life.

It certainly simplified life and conduct to her. She could talk to a clergyman and impress him with her orthodoxy and goodness without any suspicion, on her own part, that she was playing the hypocrite. It was simple and genuine as far as she was concerned, for it fulfilled her canon of good taste. Crime, by this, if only it was saved from vulgarity, was quite as correct as religion. Personal gratification was, with her as with thousands of other women, the most

powerful motive, and so long as her artistic taste was not offended, all avenues, whether good or bad, were available to her for its acquisition.

This will explain her connection with Owen Skinner. Her cousin, Raymond Ballantyne, had disappointed her. She thought that he would have married her, but he did not offer to do so. His age and mode of life had enfeebled his ardour, so that the physical beauty which had at once captivated and conquered Skinner, and Septimus Dorset, and many other men she had met with, failed to induce Raymond Ballantyne to marry her. She might have gained her end in this but for the counter influence of Skinner, who wanted her for himself. But Skinner was a mere blunderer compared with Meta Dalbert, whose dominant passion was love of honour and position, and whose one pursuit was gain; but who determined to have and enjoy it, if possible, without compromising herself or doing violence to her good taste.

There was, of course, unpleasant work to be done—there always is under such circumstances—but others would do that for her, and in such a manner that she was not offended nor involved.

Mrs Dalbert stepped upon the street as fair and finished a specimen of a society woman as could well be met with anywhere. From her gloves to her boots she was faultlessly attired. How little would a stranger have dreamt of the errand upon which she was bound.

She travelled into the southern suburbs by omnibus, and there called a cab, and instructed the man to drive her out to Storm-Cliff.

"To 'The Towers,' ma'am?" queried the man.

"No," she replied shortly, "to 'Fernville.'"

"The man must have recognised me," she thought. It did not trouble her, however; it only suggested to her just then, that the man must have been impressed with her personality to so remember her.

It must not be expected that Mrs Dalbert was

harassed with anxious thoughts about the fate of Dr Strong as the cab rolled smoothly along toward Storm-Cliff. Most women would have been in a fever of anxiety; but her mind was too much occupied with her own thoughts and plans. She wanted wealth; she wished to be mistress of "Storm-Cliff Towers," but, if possible, without the addition of Owen Skinner.

She might be content to make use of a man, to flatter and encourage him as far as it suited her purpose, but it was another thing to make a life companion of him.

She had beauty, talent, and style. She was utterly unscrupulous as to the rest, and with money she believed that she could choose her companions and her position at will.

Nor was she the first woman who has so thought or been similarly disappointed.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CAVES OF DESPAIR

In the meantime things were going badly with Grace and Beatrice at "Steynbridge."

It will be remembered that we are now referring to the second morning following the disappearance of Dr Strong.

Stimulated by the promise of reward held out by Grace, a thorough systematic search was being made of the whole neighbourhood by police constables and detectives. The trouble was that they had no clue to start them upon the right track.

With splendid loyalty to her brother, who had given implicit orders that nothing was to be told Beatrice which was likely to distress her mind, the brave girl had carried her trouble with a composed exterior, and kept the mistress of "The Towers" in ignorance of the cause of her brother's continued absence. But it was evident this morning that matters could not continue so any longer. The lines of care were deepening upon the sister's face, and do what she would she could not remove all trace of overnight weeping.

"Miss Strong, I am sure that there is something the matter; your brother is ill or something has happened to him? Grace!" she said, dropping all formality as she saw the shadow of a great fear pass over the girl's face, "Grace! . . . tell me what has happened to him!"

There were tears in Grace's eyes but she still controlled herself. "I promised him to tell you of nothing which might distress you."

"Then he has been up at 'The Towers' and has disappeared?" said Beatrice with forced calmness. "Grace," she continued, bursting into tears, "it is my wicked silence that has killed him."

"Whatever can you mean?" exclaimed Grace in astonishment.

But the only answer Beatrice gave was a passionate flood of tears, and it was not until some time afterwards that she told Grace of her strange experience on the night of her first sleeping at "The Towers."

The face of Grace Strong wore a very serious aspect as Beatrice told her the whole of the story.

"I think that you have done wrong, Beatrice," she said simply, "in withholding such important information; but it may relieve you to know that my brother had warning that beneath 'The Towers' there was an excavation."

She then hurriedly told Beatrice of the story of the gold-mine, which had been told to her brother. After a long and anxious consultation they then decided to at once inform the detectives who were then engaged upon the case, and who, for convenience and to reassure the servants, were stopping at "The Towers." It would not be necessary, said Grace, to tell them more than what had been told the doctor, except that they should investigate the bedroom from which the lawyer and doctor had both disappeared.

"I must go with you," said Beatrice; "I feel quite strong!"

Grace did her best to dissuade her, but without success. It seemed as if a load was lifted off the mind of Beatrice; and that she had at last shared her dreadful secret with a friend, seemed to have infused new vigour into her whole frame.

Grace's anxiety, however, was now for her brother. "However did I overlook what he said about the

excavations? Let us not lose a minute. Are you sure that you can walk the distance?"

And so they hurried off together toward where the great belt of fir trees, with the white pinnacles of "The Towers," stood up against the eastern horizon, and beyond which there stretched only the ocean.

It was after midday when they entered the long avenue of trees which led up to the mansion. Beatrice thought the place had never looked more forbidding. It was a cloudy day, and the wind soughed and moaned among the trees, but they hurried on, intent upon their errand.

As they drew nearer the house they were met by William, who shyly expressed his pleasure at seeing his young mistress out again.

"Where are the detectives, William?" asked Beatrice.

"I am not sure, miss, but I believe they have gone into the city."

This proved to be the case, and there was no alternative but to sit down and have some lunch which Lucy laid for them, and await their return.

Two hours dragged slowly by, and at last Grace suggested that they should go round the grounds, for Beatrice seemed much better, no doubt partly owing to the excitement of the occasion.

They walked around the mansion, and Beatrice pointed out the limestone formation of the hill upon which "Storm-Cliff Towers" was built, and how possible it might be that some kind of underground vaults or cellars were below the house. They made no discovery, however; if there was any secret entrance from the grounds to the mansion, they could find no trace of it.

"Let us go in and carefully examine the house ourselves," said Grace impatiently. "It seems a dreadful thing to think that possibly my brother may be dying within actual reach of us, while we stand about here unable to assist or rescue him."

"If he is so near as that I fear he is dead," answered Beatrice sadly.

"You must not say that!" said Grace passionately.

"You believe that he is still alive, dear?"

"I am certain of it," said Grace. "If he had been dead I should have known something about it. No, he cannot be dead!"

The two ladies entered the house again. "Let us go and sit down together in the room," said Grace. "It it broad daylight," she continued, "and my own opinion is that there is nothing ghostly about it. If we examine the place together carefully, who can tell, we may make a discovery."

There was no need to further explain what room was referred to. The whole picture of it had become engraved upon the mind of Beatrice. It was the room of mystery and tragedy where, for aught she knew, three men had found their deaths, and alas! for two of them she felt herself, to some extent, accountable.

They were, however, both of them too eager to think of actual personal danger as they entered the large apartment from the big entrance-hall doorway. They would run any risk just then to obtain a clue to the whereabouts of the doctor.

They sat down, leaving the door into the hall open; the subdued light of the cloudy afternoon streamed in from the large bay-window. Everything was in perfect order, for although there was not a servant in the house who would enter the room alone after nightfall, they went in and out during the day. It was after dusk that sounds were occasionally heard there, and the report that Raymond Ballantyne had been seen at night, sitting in the room, was generally believed by the servants.

Grace Strong, however, was of a very incredulous school. Superstition had no place in her constitution, and she very soon got up from her chair and

commenced a quiet but close examination of the fireplace, which was made to fit into an open chimney. The whole work was unique. The grate was unusually large, and was of burnished steel, set off with brass mountings. It was the glazed tiling and terra-cotta work which specially engaged her attention. The whole of it was uncommon, and the designs were exclusively of foreign execution.

"Is there anything else similar to this in the house?" she asked.

"No," whispered Beatrice, for somehow they both talked as though they feared someone might overhear them.

"I should like to have a strong man and a crowbar about this fireplace for half an hour," she said excitedly to Beatrice. "Would you mind the whole of this beautiful work being broken up? Remember my brother's life may be at stake," she said, as Beatrice seemed to pause for a moment.

"It is not that. I don't mind one bit if the whole place is destroyed, so long as the doctor's life can be saved by it," replied Beatrice hurriedly.

She was on the point of calling for Lucy to bring the coachman and gardener with tools to break down the fireplace, when Grace stopped her.

"Let us sit down and think, just for a moment, before we destroy this beautiful work. If the whole of this square is a lift, there should be some means of working it from here, as well as from below."

They had removed the rug, and the whole of the large tessellated square was exposed to view. There was a fancy border in coloured tile-work, and a close examination showed a distinct line, which suggested that Beatrice was correct in all she had surmised as to this being a way of secret access to the room. During the examination they made very little noise, and had carried on their conversation in subdued tones; the feeling was in the mind of each of

them that at any moment they might make a discovery.

"There must be a knob or panel, or something to press, or push, or pull back," said Grace, who was examining the mantelpiece and its surroundings. But although she pushed and pulled, it was all without avail.

The mantelpiece was of polished black marble with much carving and embossed work upon it, and Grace pushed and pulled at each projecting part, and she was about to leave it in despair of discovering the secret.

Suddenly, however, the hearth and fireplace visibly commenced to move, and she sprang back to where Beatrice sat upon the sofa watching her.

"Do you not see it?" she exclaimed.

The fireplace was slowly moving downward, just as Beatrice had before seen it.

"You must have touched the spring that works it," she said.

"I did not feel anything move at my touch," replied Grace, trembling with excitement as she watched the slowly descending hearth and fireplace with an anxious and frightened face.

Just then they heard a masculine voice from below: "You take a tremendous risk, Meta, to do this in broad daylight."

"If you are afraid, I'll go up with him alone; he will be dead in another hour or two unless he has assistance."

Grace caught Beatrice by the hand and looked straight in her face. She said nothing audibly, but if ever a face spoke, hers did then.

"For heaven's sake be firm and silent," was what her face said. She pulled Beatrice back to where the bed curtains would partially conceal them, and there they stood with their hearts beating, almost audibly, as they awaited developments.

They could not hear very distinctly, but the sounds

from below indicated that something heavy was being moved. The woman's voice seemed to be speaking in subdued entreaty.

"It's too heavy," said the man's voice. "It won't lift you both."

"Try," replied the woman's voice. "We cannot send him up there alone to die, probably, in a room which has so ill a name that it is no doubt but seldom entered," she continued.

"You forget the detectives," replied the man's voice.

"No, I don't. They have gone to Sydney, and no one is likely to enter the room during their absence."

There was a silence for some minutes, which seemed an eternity in length to the two women; then there was a slight sound heard, and the feathers of a fashionable hat appeared in the centre of the opening.

A moment after, there confronted them Meta Dalbert, her eyes flashing with excitement and defiance, and huddled together at her feet was the unconscious form of Dr Strong.

His head was upon a cushion, and his body so arranged as to make room for Mrs Dalbert upon the square. It came flush up to the level of the floor, and she was about to bend over the doctor, to move his head, when she caught sight of the two girls, and for fully half a minute the three women stood and looked at each other in silence.

Mrs Dalbert even now did not lose her presence of mind. She drew herself up to her full height, for she guessed who the two ladies were that confronted her. Her pose was simply superb. Her right foot was extended slightly, sufficient to throw the weight of the body upon her left foot; she placed one hand over the other, in which she held her gloves. A number of rings flashed upon the exposed hand, and one of them was the cat's-eye which has already figured in this story.

The fascination lasted only for the time stated, however, when Grace, seeing she had only a woman to deal with, was springing forward to the assistance of her brother.

"One moment, Miss Strong," commenced Meta in a commanding voice. "Before you touch your brother, hear a word in explanation."

Grace was about to interpose.

"Keep quiet, if you value your brother's life. You will have to hear me before you can help him. I have only to stamp on this floor and I shall have assistance."

"Let her speak," said Beatrice to Grace.

"What I have to say is this," said Mrs Dalbert, pulling on one of her gloves. "Your brother will not die, and I have saved his life. Had he been left in the hands of others you would never have seen him again. I read in this morning's paper that Dr Strong had suddenly disappeared under strange and unaccountable circumstances from this house. I surmised what had probably happened, and came out from Sydney determined to save his life if possible. In doing so I have, no doubt, to some extent compromised myself; and had I expected to have met Miss Ballantyne and Miss Strong I should probably have left the doctor to his own resources—and his fate. When examining this room the night before last, he, no doubt, found the secret of this spring lift, and, descending by it, was caught in a trap by his own folly in meddling with matters he did not understand."

Grace here attempted to speak, but Mrs Dalbert's eyes and hand warned her to be silent.

"I have just finished!" she cried out angrily. "Don't attempt to call the servants or detain me, or ask for any further explanation, or there will be trouble. Be satisfied that I have saved the doctor's life, and if you are wise you will say nothing to the detectives either."

Without another word she picked up a dainty parasol which lay upon the floor, and with an evident knowledge of the house, stepped out into the hall and through the entrance door, and was gone.

. . . . . .

The whole thing happened in a few minutes, and Beatrice and Grace had watched and listened to the woman spell-bound. They both guessed who she was. The pause was only for a moment, and then they both sprang forward to where Dr Strong lay, an inanimate heap upon the floor. In their excitement they forgot that they stood upon the fatal square, and bent down and chafed his cold hands.

"He will die, Beatrice! He will die!" exclaimed Grace in an agony of feeling. "Oh! my poor brother! To think that he has come to this!"

"I will bring in the servants to help us," said Beatrice as she ran into the corridor, calling for Lucy in a tone of voice which quickly aroused the household.

CHAPTER XIX

SEYMOUR GOES UNDER

"NOT in this room!" exclaimed Grace as the coachman and gardener were about to lift him upon the bed.

"No, it would never do for him to awake to consciousness here; besides, the room will need to be examined on the return of the detectives," said Beatrice hurriedly.

They carried him into an apartment on the other side of the house, and by the time a doctor was in attendance, had undressed and placed him upon the bed; Grace supervised everything.

A stimulant was administered by her direction, and his limbs sponged with hot water; cold water was applied to his head, and everything done to restore animation. He had fainted, she thought, through want of food, foul air, and exhaustion.

Dr Shirley, who came in response to her summons, expressed himself as extremely pleased with her management of the case, and although he said Dr Strong's condition was a very serious one, he had every hope of pulling him through. He himself would remain and nurse him through the crisis.

After a time the patient's breathing became more regular and natural, and in response to the effect of the stimulant, some colour returned to the pallid face.

William Shirley, M.D., had been on intimate terms with both Dr Strong and his sister, and his curiosity

to know where his friend had been found was great; but he saw that Grace was wholly absorbed with anxiety for her brother's recovery, and that while his life hung in the balance it would be useless to interrogate her. The only reply to his question as to where and how they had found him had but further mystified him. Said Grace: "We found him in the room from which he was lost; but, doctor, don't ask me anything about it now."

Dr Shirley sat and watched his patient, and occasionally felt his pulse, the beating of which was hardly perceptible.

"He looks as though he had been poisoned by a noxious gas, as well as starved," he said to Grace.

"Very likely," she replied, as she quietly, but deftly, moved about the room in attendance upon her brother's wants.

The detectives, Bruce and Seymour, returned toward evening, and on hearing of the startling turn in affairs, at once sought an interview with Beatrice.

It might have been expected that they would have evidenced much gratification at the discovery of Dr Strong; but they both regarded it as somewhat unfortunate, because they had not made the discovery themselves. On hearing the particulars, however, from Miss Ballantyne, they thought better of the case, for their only competitors were two women. It would be a queer thing if they could not manage to so report as to secure the credit of the discovery for themselves. Of course their report would have to tally with any sworn evidence which might come out in the inevitable trial following the capture of the criminals; but it would be easy enough to fix that up.

The first course was plain. Mrs Dalbert must, if possible, be immediately arrested, and, in the meantime, the chamber must be watched. They were loath to ask for further assistance at a time which seemed to offer the successful elucidation of a mysterious crime that had set all Sydney by the ears.

One of them would have to go into the city, procure a warrant, and arrest Mrs Dalbert, that is, if he could find her, while the other must watch at "The Towers."

Matters were certainly getting warm and lively for the officers; and as for "The Towers," the household was simmering with excitement. They none of them knew exactly where the missing doctor had come from, and none of them had seen Mrs Dalbert; but they all knew that the two ladies were the chief actors in the affair, and that something very extraordinary had happened to them in the haunted chamber. However, there was no possibility of the doctor being removed that night to his own residence, so with Dr Shirley and the two ladies staying in the house, there was more life about the place. At least that was the view the cook and housemaid took of the matter.

It was noteworthy that none of them had become friendly with the detectives. Had they been ordinary police-officers it is probable that the female servants would have taken them into favour at once; but to a cook or housemaid there is a great gulf fixed between a detective officer and a policeman. The former wears no alluring uniform and is less particular about his food. Then, too, the officers in question had shown themselves extremely suspicious and inquisitive. One after another they had, in an informal way, examined and cross-examined the servants.

"It's like their impertinence," said the cook, "to pry into our private affairs in the way they do, and that Seymour is the worst. He actually asked me the other day whether my hair had always been the colour it is now. The cheek of the fellow! I believe he knows every particular about the birth and history of every one of us."

The gardener was the most embittered against them, for they had made a very searching inquiry into his past career, which was not altogether to his credit;

and Seymour at one time threatened that he might find himself in trouble if he did not take care.

It was certainly not a wise course, and Detective Bruce had several times had occasion to check the ardour and impatience of his less-experienced fellow-officer.

They had a long and serious consultation before Bruce decided to start for the city to interview, and possibly arrest Mrs Dalbert.

"You will have to use the utmost vigilance, Seymour," said Bruce. "'Pon my word, I hardly care to leave you here alone, and there is just a chance that this Mrs Dalbert may not be an actual accomplice, and in going after her we may lose more valuable game."

"You ought to get there and back in three or four hours, and have the woman safely in custody."

"Ah! but it's evening now, and goodness knows where the Chamber Magistrate will be. You see, there is no one to give her in charge, and I can't very well arrest her without a warrant. There's no knowing what may happen to delay me," replied Bruce.

"You may rest sure that I won't leave the room with the fireplace until you return," said Seymour. "I feel much inclined to get the coachman and gardener in and break down into the place below, as Miss Ballantyne suggested we might," said Seymour.

"Never do! There must be some means of exit from below, and half an hour before you could break your way down there the birds would be flown. From what Miss Ballantyne says, my opinion is that someone will work the lift to-night from below to see whether the doctor has been discovered; and if the thing is managed properly they might be taken in the act. Good heavens! don't make a mess of it, Seymour. I don't know whether it would not be better to send you to Sydney after all; unless they are caught to-night there will be no chance, when

they have discovered that the doctor has been moved. They are sure, I think, to come back, but probably it will be in the early hours of the morning, and I will be back by then. There's the coachman with my horse, so I will get off at once, and be back as quickly as possible. See that you have one of the men with you until I return."

Seymour, however, decided, as his superior officer rode rapidly away, that he would not enlighten the servants any further about the matter, but would watch the chamber alone until the return of Bruce. He was eager for distinction and promotion, and if he could only do something bold and original in the present case, he might achieve both.

He decided to tell no one at all of his intended movements, for he was not deficient in personal courage, and just now he would have faced any danger, with his revolver handy, for he had great faith in his own skill and dexterity in dealing with criminals, and his curiosity was aroused to the highest pitch. He hid himself from observation, after having entered the room with the greatest quietness, and there waited.

He was in the dark, but had a bull's-eye lantern with him, which he occasionally used to look at the time. He was too much excited to feel sleepy, and sat behind the curtains of the bed thinking over all that the two ladies had told him: of the moving of the fireplace and square, and of the strange events which followed. They had specially emphasised the fact that the lift worked noiselessly, and the thought occurred to Seymour, "Suppose that I should not hear the lift, and that it should bring up someone from below who might spring on me unexpectedly."

It is a most trying thing to wait in suspense with strained nerves hour after hour alone, as Seymour was now doing. True, he had many a time watched under far more uncomfortable circumstances physically, but there was an uncanniness about the present

adventure which specially impressed itself upon his mind.

He looked at his watch and found it close upon midnight. He might almost at any time expect the return of Bruce, who might probably bring some more assistance with him.

At this he threw the light of the bull's-eye lantern upon the fireplace and square, and then carefully around the room.

He allowed to himself that it was a risky thing to do, but it reassured him. As he brought the light back, however, it fell upon the cushion on which Dr Strong's head had rested when, according to Miss Ballantyne's precise and careful statement, he had come up from below.

At this a rush of thought ran through the detective's mind. The cushion was different to others in the room. Then it occurred to him that someone might wish to recover it. Then too, as it was evidently a most ingeniously contrived piece of mechanism, those below might have some means of knowing whether the doctor's body was still lying upon the lift where they had placed it. He was in this affair fighting with no ordinary criminal; he would have to take every precaution, or they would escape him.

At last, as he thus thought the matter over, his imagination commenced to play him tricks—or it was rats, or other animals—he certainly thought he heard sounds, and once or twice allowed a glimmer of light to escape his bull's-eye so as to assure himself that the lift had not been moved. Finally, to prevent any possible mistake being made, he decided to lie down himself upon the square, and with the cushion under his head pose as the doctor. If the lift was moved he would at any rate go down with it, when of course there would be a flutter, and he might have to use his revolver, but he would have some show of achieving distinction.

"Good heaven! if it would only happen before

Bruce returned, and I could do the whole thing single-handed!"

Without another thought the plucky fellow made for the cushion and lay down upon the square with his head upon it. He had to draw up his legs a bit for he was a tall man and the position was somewhat cramped; but it was nothing to lying for six mortal hours in an iron drain-pipe, which he had done on one occasion to catch a criminal who had secreted plunder in some long grass.

He made himself quite comfortable at last with his head on the pillow, and thus waited.

"There's a queer smell about this pillow," he presently said to himself. He then began to feel a bit drowsy, for another couple of hours had passed, and the position was not nearly so suited to keeping awake as an upright one.

"Confound it!" he thought; "it will be a fine thing if I let myself go to sleep here. I shall have to get up and move about a bit." Just then he thought he heard a noise, and listened in momentary expectation of feeling the lift move under him.

Another half-hour passed and Seymour could not account for his drowsiness, but he had now been watching for over six hours, and unknown to him, there was that about the cushion calculated to induce slumber.

He shook himself, put his head down again and listened, and then closed his eyes, for it was little use keeping them open in the dark. He swore under his breath that he would not lie there any longer, then resting his head more heavily upon the pillow . . . he fell asleep!

And it was not much to be wondered at under the circumstances!

When, however, Detective Bruce returned to "Storm-Cliff Towers" the following morning in a bad humour and thoroughly tired out—for he had

failed in his search for Mrs Dalbert—he found Detective Seymour unaccountably missing.

"He must have gone out somewhere," suggested William who had met him.

But the quick eye of the detective saw that the cushion which had come up from below under the doctor's head was absent. He had thought a good deal about that cushion while away in the city, and blamed himself for not having examined it and put it somewhere under lock and key; but there was no cushion there now and no Detective Seymour, and Bruce went outside to see if he might be smoking a quiet pipe somewhere after his night of lonely watching.

But he did not find him!

CHAPTER XX

OWEN SKINNER'S ARREST

It must not be thought that during all this time Detective Bruce had overlooked Owen Skinner's possible connection with the mystery.

"Fernville Cottage" had been carefully watched by two local constables in plain clothes; but until the strange story of Mrs Dalbert's singular appearance in the haunted chamber had reached the ears of the detectives, there had been no positive grounds for making any special move in that quarter. A portion of Bruce's business in Sydney had been to find out how far he was authorised to go in regard to Skinner, and now in the unexplained absence of Seymour he bent his steps toward "Fernville."

The house in which Skinner had taken up his abode since Miss Ballantyne had inherited "Storm-Cliff Towers" was situated near the cemetery, and overlooked both "The Towers" and the Pacific. It stood completely isolated, and had originally been built for a summer residence by a city merchant.

Mr Bruce found Skinner quietly at work in his garden, and on being asked into the house he went to the point at once.

"I am Detective Bruce, of Sydney."

Mr Skinner bowed, as though the information gave him unexpected pleasure.

"You know Mrs Dalbert of Leichardt, I believe

—a cousin of the late Raymond Ballantyne, of 'Storm-Cliff Towers'?"

"Yes," said Mr Skinner.

"She is proved to be connected with the mysterious disappearance at 'The Towers,'" said Bruce, firing a shot right into the enemy's camp, as he thought.

"You surprise me," said Skinner, showing great interest in the detective's conversation.

"Do you know anything of her recent movements?" said Bruce.

"She called for half an hour yesterday," replied Skinner; "but I have not seen her since."

"May I ask the nature of her business with you?" said the detective.

"Certainly; she called to tell me about what she had read of the disappearance of Dr Strong, and to talk over the affair. I am, of course, deeply interested in the matter, having been so long resident at 'The Towers,' and being a relative of the late owner."

"Are you aware that there is a subterranean vault or chamber below the northern portion of the mansion, and that a remarkable lift works from the fireplace?" asked Bruce.

"No," replied Skinner.

"There is, however," answered the detective, "and Mrs Dalbert knows of it; and my opinion is that you know about it too. You are my prisoner, Mr Skinner."

The detective covered him with a revolver.

"You can put up the shooting iron," said the man quietly. "I shall not attempt to evade you or escape. I don't think, however, it's worth your while to arrest me at present."

"Why not?" asked Bruce.

"Because I am in a position to bargain with you for the life of your fellow-officer. If you arrest me, Seymour may be dead before you can render him assistance. If you take me to 'The Towers,' and promise me three hours' immunity from arrest or

pursuit, I will assist you to save Seymour's life."

The detective looked at his prisoner as he anxiously turned the matter over in his mind.

"Where is Mrs Dalbert?" he asked.

"In Sydney, I believe."

"You had better come with me to 'The Towers.'"

"Are you going to act upon my suggestion?" asked Skinner anxiously.

"I am not," said the detective decidedly.

The two men looked at each other for a moment, and then Bruce stepped close up to Skinner with a pair of handcuffs between his fingers, one hand still holding the revolver. Before the man well knew what was transpiring, Bruce had handcuffed him.

"Now," said the detective, "sit down for a moment while I talk to you. First of all, this is the warrant authorising me to arrest you"; at this he showed him the document upon which he had so suddenly acted.

"I must now warn you," he continued, "that anything you may say can be used against you at your trial. At the same time, if you give me any information that will save further sacrifice of life, as in the case of Detective Seymour, which you have referred to, it will be to your advantage."

"I know nothing whatever about Seymour," said Skinner.

"Come now, don't make a fool of yourself, sir," said the detective; "you have just given yourself away completely by offering to show me how to save the life of Detective Seymour, if in danger. You know all about this matter, and will probably have to stand your trial for murder, so you need not now come any of that tomfoolery."

Skinner was about to reply, when there came a peremptory rap upon the outer door, which was at once opened by the servant.

"Mr Skinner in?"

"Yes, sir; will you please wait a moment," said the woman, in an agitated tone of voice.

"Has he anyone with him?" asked the voice, as its owner pushed his way into the house.

Owen Skinner looked at Detective Bruce, and the police-officer looked at him.

"You see I was only just in time," Bruce said; "that's Seymour."

"Curse him!" said Skinner.

A moment after Seymour stood with them in the room.

"I see that I am too late to make the arrest," he said, smiling at his fellow-officer, "but I have the evidence."

"What is it?" asked Bruce.

"Murder," replied Seymour.

"Had we not better go on to 'The Towers'?" said Bruce, who, although greatly pleased at the turn in events, and also at the safety of his colleague, felt that he was not exactly taking first place in the affair.

"No, I think that we had better get our prisoner into a safe place first, and secure Mrs Dalbert; besides, it will be better to give Dr Strong and Miss Ballantyne another day of quiet before we have any further investigations at 'The Towers.'"

As they were completing their arrangements to convey Skinner to the city, Seymour wrote a note to Miss Strong, telling her that the principals in "The Towers'" mystery had been arrested, and that they need be under no alarm during the detective's absence; they might rest assured there would be no further annoyance to them on account of the subterranean apartment.

He showed this letter to Bruce before sending it, but the latter demurred.

"How do you know?" he asked. "There may be other accomplices."

"If there are," said Seymour, "they cannot get

access to the caves, for I have bolted and barred the only entrance outside the house."

"The caves!" exclaimed Bruce.

"Yes, I nearly lost my life down there, and had as queer an adventure as one seldom meets with," said Seymour, somewhat excitedly.

"It's a fairly long story," continued Seymour, "and there are one or two things I should like to have further explained by Skinner, so I think the best plan will be to leave it until we are started to drive into Sydney."

"All right," said Bruce; but he felt a bit sore that his junior should have so far got the better of him. "I can also tell you a few things which I have discovered about Mrs Dalbert," he said.

CHAPTER XXI

DETECTIVE SEYMOUR'S STORY

It was not until Sydney was reached, however, and Skinner safely lodged in jail, that the detective's story was told. The prisoner had exhibited an entirely different demeanour after the appearance of Seymour. He evidently regretted the admission he had made to Bruce, and in reply to any questions put to him by the detectives, expressed himself as personally ignorant of anything connected with the events which had transpired.

"We shall have to secure Mrs Dalbert," said Seymour.

"Yes," replied Bruce; "her evidence seems absolutely necessary to secure a conviction against Skinner. He is a clever scoundrel; I never knew the trail of a crime to be more artfully covered over. Let us hear, however, of your adventure down below."

"It was my bull's-eye lantern that saved me down there," said Seymour.

"How came Dr Strong to escape?" asked Bruce.

"I don't know, unless by a miracle or the timely interposition of a friendly hand. But it will be best for me to begin at the beginning and then we can form our plans for future action.

"I must have been asleep when I descended into the underground room," continued Seymour. "I had been watching for something like six hours and was

afraid that I might dose off, or that the lift might be so quietly worked that in the dark I might be unaware of it; so I lay down upon the lift with my head on the cushion, just in the position in which they found the doctor.

"I am inclined to think that the cushion was tampered with, either drugged or made of hops, or something put upon it to induce sleep, for I can account for it in no other way."

"Oh, you were clean done up, and when you put your head on the pillow what was more natural than that you should go to sleep," said Bruce.

"Well, we won't discuss that," replied Seymour, "although I am not sure myself that I ever slept, for that lift has been constructed by a mechanical genius, and works perfectly smoothly and without noise. I may have been lying there for an hour or two when I started to consciousness. I felt that there was a change in the atmosphere, and felt a light draught which I had not noticed in the room before. My lantern was covered but was still alight, so I turned it up and uncovered it. You may guess that I got a start.

"I was still lying in front of the fireplace, but instead of being in the bedroom I could see a kind of shaft or well above me, and around there was a large underground cave or chamber. I sat up at once and drew my revolver, for within a few yards of me sat a man in a chair, seemingly asleep. I looked at him again. The face was partly turned away from me; but my blood almost ran cold. It was the corpse of Raymond Ballantyne. I recognised him at once, for I had often seen him in the city.

"I jumped up and stepped cautiously on to the floor, and with my bull's-eye took a good look at the apparition to be quite sure that my senses were not deceiving me, then I threw the light cautiously into other parts of the place; but a moment afterward I got another shock, for turning round I found that the lift, relieved

of my weight, was steadily ascending to its former position. In fact it was too high up for me then to catch hold of it, and a minute afterward had passed up the well to its place in the bedroom.

"For a few minutes I felt myself regularly trapped, and I was most apprehensive as to who might be with me in the cave in addition to the corpse of old Ballantyne.

"I could hear nothing except a queer rumbling and sucking sort of sound, such as might have come down a long passage leading to the ocean. You may imagine that I was in a queer state of mind, not to mention how I felt in my body. I turned the lantern upon the floor at my feet—it was fairly smooth and a bit gravelly; then I threw it behind me and saw a table and chair, and then a couch and a lamp upon some shelving let into the wall. I saw now for the first time that the place was a cave which had been artificially enlarged. The lift had evidently been constructed at the farthest end of it, in the direction of the land. Having discovered this much, I felt a faintness coming over me, and walked over toward the chair and table to sit down, when my eye fell upon a bottle of whisky, and a large jug, and a tin with biscuits. I had had nothing since the afternoon of the previous day and I can tell you the refreshment was most acceptable.

"I shall never forget how I sat there and thought over the situation. I had matches about me, so I blew out the lantern, partly to save the light and partly to prevent myself from becoming a target for an enemy's pistol. I munched the biscuits in the dark and watched for the appearance of someone.

"I concluded that someone had lowered the lift down, and that he must have seen me. Why had I been allowed to escape? For about half an hour I sat there in painful suspense, peering into the darkness, with my finger on the trigger of the revolver. There was no sound, however, so I presently lit my lantern

again to more carefully examine my surroundings and see if I could find out anything about Mr Dorset. I had no fear for myself as I was a match for any violence I might meet with there, for I felt sure that you would be back shortly, and that if I could not get out by any other means I could make you hear me by shouting. And there was the chance that I might find out how to work the lift from below, or might discover some means of exit into the grounds, or on to the rocks. Looking at my watch I found that it was just four o'clock, so I took out my note-book and made a memo of what had happened in case I should meet with an accident before getting out again.

"This corner of the place I found on closer examination to be arranged with considerable care, as though someone had sat there either writing or engaged in some other occupation. There was a rug on the ground and writing materials on the shelf. I examined the latter but could find no trace of manuscript; on the lower shelf, however, was the lamp, which was trimmed and full of kerosene. This relieved my fear about a light, and I at once lit it and proceeded to investigate in other directions."

"You certainly had a lively time, old man. I wish that I had been with you," said Bruce.

This was a great thing for Bruce to say, for he rarely expressed approval of anything which his colleague did; but he was evidently favourably impressed and interested.

Seymour chuckled to himself. "Nothing succeeds like success," he thought, as he looked across at his senior.

"I went over and had a good look at the corpse of the late proprietor of 'The Towers,' and when you see it you will think with me that it is a ghastly spectacle. The body has evidently been preserved in some way, for it has a mummy-like appearance, but why it has been done is a mystery with no explanation."

"Did you examine the body closely?" asked Bruce.

"No," replied Seymour, "something happened shortly after which suggested the advisability of another course of action; but as far as I could see by a casual examination there was no sign of violence about the face or skull. The hands were resting upon the knees and the whole attitude is singularly natural, just as though death might have overtaken him when he was asleep. It was tied to the chair and has a queer smell."

"A smell of drugs or preservatives or disinfectants?" suggested Bruce.

"There are really three large caves, probably limestone," continued Seymour, "and a long passage or a series of smaller caves with an opening right out on the cliff, but which can only be used at low tide. It must have been high-water at about five or six o'clock this morning. You will learn why I say this later on. As soon as I had taken in the surroundings of the first cave I commenced to examine that to the left, which is several feet lower. There were plenty of footmarks here, but except a case or two, which may have contained spirits at one time, there was nothing of importance to be seen. While in there, however, I was suddenly startled by hearing one of the most weird and awful sounds imaginable, and then there came a great rush of wind which nearly extinguished the lamp I was carrying. I waited and listened for several minutes, and then it was repeated. It was simply awful, and with that dead man in the next place, and the consciousness that Mr Dorset's body was likely enough somewhere about, I can tell you it was by no means a cheerful situation. I must have been a full hour in that place protecting the lamp, so that it should not be blown out, and that infernal racket going on all the time.

"I thought of every possible natural explanation, but it was of no use, and that hour in the inner cave

was about the worst I ever remember spending in my life."

"Well, man, what was it?" said Bruce at last, somewhat impatiently.

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Seymour, evidently enjoying his senior's excited state of mind.

"After a while I went cautiously out and passed by the big cave into a third and smaller one which I judged led in the direction of the sea. I had to climb down in some places as the descent was quite steep, almost like stairs. It was more like a passage, and I went along shading the light very cautiously, when, after turning an abrupt corner, all at once I heard the same shrieking sound in front of me, and a gust of salt air rushing past extinguished the lamp; but before it did so I saw a white, ghostly object right in front of me. You'll think me foolish perhaps, but just as the light went out I fired my revolver straight at it.

"The darkness for a few minutes was intense, and then a sort of phosphorescent light confronted me, and the same wild whistling scream began. I tell you it made me sweat, but I laughed now, for I had guessed what it was—it was high-tide, and there was a blow-hole connected with the sea in the passage in front of me. It evidently only acted during rough weather and at high tide. I had, therefore, no alternative but to go back and wait for an hour or so for the tide to go down a bit before following up my investigations in that direction."

"But," said Bruce, "did you find any trace of Dorset?"

"No, but I have a good idea where his remains will be found," said Seymour.

"Where?" asked Bruce.

"At the bottom of the blow-hole," said Seymour.

"Nonsense; if he had fallen down there his body would have been sucked into the ocean as the tide receded," replied Bruce.

"I don't know so much about that," said Seymour.

"All right, but for heaven's sake don't commence to argue the case or there will be no end to it. You ought to have been a lawyer."

When Bruce said a thing of this sort, the implied compliment always carried a sour taste with it.

"How did you get out of the trap?" he continued.

"I went back, as I told you, and carefully set about examining the mechanism of the lift arrangement," said Seymour, not taking any notice of his senior's gibe. "I found this to be a most curious piece of work, constructed with singular skill, and worked by hydraulic pressure through a seeming storage of force obtained by the pressure of the water in the blow-hole passage. It was some time before I could discover the means of putting the lift in motion, but I did so at last—at least I found out how to work it from below; the upstairs portion is another matter, which I have not yet got the clue to.

"I was relieved, however, on finding out that I could move the lift at will from below. It was now about six o'clock, and, being anxious to find out what access there was to the place from the passage, I turned down in the direction of the blow-hole to make a further investigation. The tide had, by this time, evidently receded, for over an hour had elapsed since there had been any unusual sound in that direction. It seems to me that there must be a certain pressure on the blow-hole before the thing will work at all, for its stoppage seemed quite sudden as far as the extraordinary noise which it made went.

"I made my way through the caves with extra care this time, keeping the light of the lamp upon the path in front of me. I soon came to the shaft. It is a jagged, irregular opening in the floor of the cave, over three feet in diameter. The sides were slippery and wet with the spray from the last working, and encrusted with salt from the action of the sea-water.

"I had no means of gauging its depth or circum-

ference below, except by throwing a few pieces of loose rock down. The depth is certainly not less than twenty or thirty feet, however, and may be a good deal more.

"Anyone going along there without a light would certainly fall into it; and as I found no sign of Septimus Dorset's remains, it seems to me that he was either murdered and thrown in there, or was left below in the dark, and, groping around to get out, fell in, and so met with his death."

"You found no weapon about there with which a murder might have been committed?" suggested Bruce.

"No, positively nothing. Except for the body of Raymond Ballantyne, there's nothing to indicate murder there at all."

"Oh! there's been murder all right," said Bruce. "Mrs Dalbert and Skinner both knew of the place, and made use of the secret entrance to 'The Towers.' Then why should the body of Mr Ballantyne be secreted there except there has been a murder?"

"No doubt about the crime, but how are we going to sheet it home to the criminal? That's the question," said Seymour. "However, I have no doubt there is plenty more to find out down there, and we shall have to thoroughly overhaul the whole place. I may say that it is about a couple of hundred yards along a fairly straight series of caves and passages to the rocks which overlook the Pacific coast. It is closed in with a small door of solid rock, which is as curious a piece of masonry as I ever saw. Access to the place can only be obtained with safety at low-water, and the doorway from the coast fastens upon the inside. I made everything secure and then came back and got into 'The Towers' by the lift, and at once made my way up to 'Fernville' to see if I could secure Skinner. By the way, however, what is it you have found out about Mrs Dalbert?"

"Enough, I think, to secure a conviction both in her case and in that of Skinner," replied Bruce. "She evidently got a bit afraid of the look of things, and left Leichardt quite suddenly and unexpectedly, and without leaving any address; but, by some accident, she has left a handbag behind her with a number of letters in it which I think may incriminate both herself and Skinner."

"What do you intend to do to-morrow at the Police Court?" asked Seymour.

"Why, get a remand, of course, and then go out to Storm-Cliff and recover the body of Raymond Ballantyne," said Bruce.

"By George!" exclaimed Seymour, every pulse in his body tingling with gratified pride, "won't there be a sensation when the particulars are published."

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLOW-HOLE WORKS

It should be explained that Seymour's note to Miss Strong had set the minds of "The Towers'" household somewhat at rest.

Dr Strong was recovering fast, and on the morning upon which Owen Skinner was brought up at the Police Court, was well enough to get up for an hour or so and converse quietly with his sister and Beatrice.

He could, however, give them no information about the place below, for the blow had stunned him, and when consciousness returned he found himself bound fast and in perfect darkness. It seemed to him like a long, hideous nightmare, and during part of the time most horrible noises had been heard. He had struggled for hours with his hands; but had no recollection of anything connected with his liberation.

He said nothing at this time as to what he had seen himself, fearing to give a shock to the nerves of Beatrice and his sister; but he listened to their story with wonder and thankfulness.

"I no doubt owe my life to Mrs Dalbert," he said.

Grace, however, was by no means friendly inclined to this self-possessed lady. "Likely enough it was only remorse and fear which made her interpose," she said.

"You think, then, that she had knowledge of Mr Dorset's disappearance?" he said to Grace.

"I feel certain that she had," replied his sister. "Mrs Dalbert and Owen Skinner have been confederates in crime, and the one is as bad as the other."

"Ah, well; we'll hope not," said the doctor.

. . . . . .

In the meantime the detectives had obtained a remand, and, having set two other men to trace out the retreat of Mrs Dalbert, were hurrying back as fast as possible to "Storm-Cliff Towers."

Both Seymour and Bruce were anxious to hear about the condition of Dr Strong, for they felt sure that he would be a very valuable witness in the case. He was too weak, however, to see them on their return; in fact, had gone off to sleep, and Grace determined that he should on no account be disturbed.

She listened, however, with intense interest to the brief account which they gave of Seymour's discovery and Skinner's arrest, and in turn gave them the benefit of any information she had received from the doctor. Their wish, however, to see either Miss Ballantyne or Dr Strong was firmly denied them; they must wait until the morrow.

A good dinner, which awaited Bruce and Seymour in the housekeeper's room, was some recompense, however, and the two men discussed the savoury viands and talked over the case which they had in hand.

Bruce was for sleeping over it, but Seymour was anxious to prosecute the search at once.

"You see," he urged, "we both of us have had a good night's rest, and are fresh and ready; then the tide will be down. Yes!" he exclaimed as he looked at his watch and then examined the newspaper, "it is dead low-water at eight o'clock to-night, so we shall just be able to do it before the blow-hole commences to work."

"You say you came up into the house from these subterranean passages by the lift?" queried Bruce.

"Yes," said Seymour, and the tone of his voice indicated that he had just remembered that he had overlooked an awkward fact.

"Ah! and you have carefully bolted and barred the door leading on to the rocks?" said Bruce.

"I have," and Seymour laughed grimly at his superior officer; "but I have no knowledge of how to work the lift from the bedroom."

"You have made a bit of a mess of it, I think," said Bruce.

Seymour was no doubt annoyed with himself, for a long and careful search had already been made in the chamber to discover any secret spring by which the lift could be worked from above.

He had intended to take some precaution against its closing upon him, but the catch—whatever it was—had fastened before he could prevent it. The position was doubly mortifying, for it was of the utmost importance that the place below should be explored at once. However, dinner being over, the two men went outside to have a smoke before they made any further attempt to discover the secret of the movement of the lift from the bedchamber.

The view from the seaward side of "The Towers" was, on that night, one which even a very much absorbed man could scarcely let pass unobserved. The moon had not risen more than half an hour, and a glittering pathway stretched itself across the great heaving mass of waters, which broke in thunder and spray upon the serried rocks that lined the shore.

"Do you think that you could make out the entrance to the passage from the rocks by moonlight?" said Bruce.

"I scarcely think so," replied Seymour; "but we might stroll over and look down from the rocks and see."

The fir trees which so thickly encompassed "The Towers" had been thinned out somewhat in this direction, and the men passed through them down-

hill toward the sea. It was not rough weather, for there were few white horses to be seen riding upon the crests of the billows, but the long, rolling swell, which burst with such force against the brown rocks, told of storm and tumult a hundred, or perhaps a thousand miles away.

"Do you think there is pressure enough to work that underground blow-hole to-night?" asked Bruce.

"I cannot tell," replied his companion, "but it certainly will not be safe for us to go over the cliffs to-night in search of a secret passage to the caves."

The two detectives returned together to the house, and at once proceeded to examine the room, in order, if possible, to discover the secret spring, or connections, which moved the lift from above.

For fully an hour they searched unsuccessfully. The idea of using force was out of the question, for it would have aroused the whole household, and, even then, it was doubtful whether anything short of gunpowder would be successful

The two men looked at each other in baffled annoyance, when Bruce said, "It is my opinion that there is no means of working it at all in this room."

At that very moment Seymour's finger had pressed an ornamental flower in a peculiar way. How, he could not exactly tell, but it had moved, and with it the two men, who were standing upon the fireplace, felt themselves commencing to descend with the lift.

"At last!" ejaculated Bruce.

The suddenness of the movement caught them, however, somewhat unprepared, and Bruce was for returning for their revolvers, coats, and lanterns, which, in their eager search for the secret of the lift, they had laid aside upon a table.

"There are matches and a lamp down there," said Seymour.

A few minutes afterward the two, with the aid of the light, examined the fearful form of the one-time proprietor of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

"It's the most ghastly idea that I ever heard of," said Bruce.

"The body must have been preserved for some very special purpose," remarked Seymour, who had thought a great deal upon the subject during and after his last visit.

"What do you mean?" queried Bruce.

"See the face," said Seymour; "it's like that of a man asleep. The skin is wrinkled and tanned as though some powerful preservative had been used, but see how composed looking the features are. That man died in a trance, or at any rate while asleep, and his body has been thus preserved and kept close at hand for some reason of importance to the perpetrator of the crime—if crime it is."

"The sooner we get it up out of this the better," said Bruce, who was struck by the remark of his colleague.

"Very good," said Seymour; "we had better lift it, chair and all as it is, upon the platform, and one of us go up with it, and then return and search the caves further."

"All right; you go up with it, and I will remain here until you return," said Bruce.

They stooped on each side of the chair, and exerted themselves somewhat, in expectation of a heavy burden, but both were taken by surprise at finding how light the chair and its occupant together was.

"The body cannot be here at all," said Seymour in astonishment.

"No doubt; it's a queer affair altogether," said Bruce, as they placed it upon the platform. "Bring down my revolver and lantern," he said to Seymour as the lift gradually ascended.

Bruce followed it with his eye as it cleared the roof of the cave, and passed out of sight up the well. Then he examined the framework in which the lift worked. It was of steel and lightly constructed, but the workmanship was exact and finished.

"Skinner never made this concern by himself," he said.

The detective sat in the chair which Seymour had discovered the previous night, and turned the lamp round so that its light might fall upon the apparatus. There was a carefully made foundation with rubber ridges for the lift to rest upon on its descent; and to work the lift there was a hydraulic piston-rod, well oiled and free from rust, similar to those now so commonly used for the same purpose in large buildings.

Bruce evidently found abundant material for thought, for he sat there in deep meditation for fully a quarter of an hour before it occurred to him that Seymour was rather long in returning.

Then he aroused himself, and, placing his head under the well, called out to his fellow-officer to make haste. The solid mass of stone above him, however, only seemed to throw his voice back again, and with a muttered oath at Seymour's unnecessary delay (for Bruce was greatly excited, and the long absence of Seymour irritated him), sat down in the chair again.

"What the —— can have happened to him!" he exclaimed at last. "He must have been gone half an hour."

The fact was, that after dragging the chair off the lift, and getting the various articles together he wanted, Seymour had found out that, do what he would, he could not work the lift again, and while Bruce was below fuming and swearing over the delay, Seymour was sweating over the ornamental flower which moved under the pressure of his finger, but, unfortunately, without starting the lift.

The fact was there had to be a certain weight upon the centre of the lift to work it from above; this was ordinarily supplied by the chair, but in the case of their previous descent had been supplied by the substantial form of Detective Bruce. The latter might have worked it from below if he had carefully examined the mechanism of the thing, but as he grew

tired of waiting for Seymour's return he started upon a tour of discovery on his own account among the caves and passages which, partly natural and partly artificial, lay below the north end of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

When the first shrill, melancholy sound from the blow-hole caught his ear, Bruce started; but remembering what Seymour had told him, felt no such alarm as had his colleague.

"It's an uncanny spot this," he thought; "but I would like to see how that blow-hole works before the tide gets high enough to make the approach to it difficult or dangerous."

He had found out the cave from which the series of caves or passages led on to the rocks, and, after carefully trimming the lamp and seeing that he had matches handy in case it should be blown out, he groped his way in the direction of the blow-hole.

It was a longer distance than he had expected, and the path was steep in places and rugged; and fearful of the character of the path, he proceeded with great caution. The occasional rush of compressed air, and the awful gurgling scream of the singular phenomenon, told him that it was working with vigour and might be somewhat dangerous to approach.

He groped his way through several small caves which connected with each other, and was turning into a larger one in front, when the blow-hole sent its contents up with exceptional force. The tide was now nearly at the full, and the heavy swell had increased during the past hour.

No lamp could have withstood the blast of compressed salt air and spray which now struck the detective with full force, and in a moment he was in darkness.

Bruce was by no means deficient in physical pluck and personal courage, and he stood his ground, bracing himself firmly to withstand the rush of air, and holding the extinguished lamp in front of him. The

darkness seemed like that of Egypt—one that could be felt—and for several minutes he stood perfectly still, in expectation of another motion from the blow-hole.

For a few minutes everything was quiet, so he stood the lamp upon the floor of the cave in readiness to strike a match and re-light it, and bending upon one knee felt in his pocket for the matches.

He stopped, however, for with his head thus bent he saw in front of him what seemed to be a subdued light glimmering in the distance. Immediately he was on the alert. Was it possible that there was anyone else down there?

For fully five minutes he remained thus watching, with every nerve strung to its utmost tension. Then he commenced to creep nearer, and it occurred to him that it might be phosphorescent light from the sea-water ejected from the blow-hole, and he moved nearer with more curiosity than alarm.

Suddenly, however, he leaped to his feet. He had approached nearer to the mouth of the blow-hole than he had expected; the passage had abruptly expanded into a somewhat lofty cave, and with a gurgling roar the thing was about to work.

The volume of water this time rushed up with a weird, awful, deafening noise, such as Bruce could never afterwards find words to adequately explain, and the whole place was lit with a soft phosphorescent light. For a moment, as the blast of air first struck his face, Bruce closed his eyes and shrank back, but he was still a good distance from the hole, and as the first long wail and scream was followed by another and a still louder one, he opened his eyes to look, and to his horror and astonishment caught a glimpse of as fearful and ghastly a sight as probably ever appeared to mortal eyes.

The blow-hole, with the strength of the Pacific Ocean operating it, was in the act of ejecting a great volume of foaming phosphorescent water, and in the

centre of it, suspended for a brief period by its terrific force—the ghastly white face and head and body distinctly visible—was a corpse, suspended erect in the midst of the glistering column.

"God save us!" exclaimed the horrified detective. ". . . It's the lawyer! . . . It's Septimus Dorset!"

The corpse was clad only in some torn shreds of clothing, which might have been the remains of the sleeping garments in which the lawyer on that fateful night had disappeared from "Storm-Cliff Towers."

For a moment or two, which to Bruce seemed hours, the awful thing hung over the abyss, and was then thrown headlong, with a wave of foaming water, into the passage.

The whole incident was so fearful, and sickening, and ghastly, and the cave and blow-hole so unnatural, that for a moment the detective staggered and felt impelled to flee from the awful spot. A moment afterward the light was gone, and Bruce turned to grope his way back in the darkness with a feeling of blind horror in his mind such as he had never experienced before.

Two hours afterward Seymour found him on the floor of one of the caves insensible. He had stumbled over a ledge, and a hurt he then received on his head, and the previous excitement, were together too much even for his iron nerves.

CHAPTER XXIII

RAYMOND BALLANTYNE'S GHOST

It has been stated that both the detectives and other officers of the police force had been searching for Meta Dalbert for several days without success; and yet the very night on which Bruce and Seymour secured the body of Raymond Ballantyne, that lady was in the vicinity of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

She had not heard of the arrest of Skinner that morning, and not knowing that the police were on her track she had come out to Storm-Cliff in the hope of meeting with Skinner, there being important reasons why she wished to see him at once.

It was quite nine o'clock when, walking home across the common, Mr Broadford saw a woman in front of him whom he recognised as Mrs Dalbert. He followed her for some distance until she entered Owen Skinner's residence. He knew that a warrant was out for her arrest, and that the detectives were back at "The Towers," so he hurried over to give them the information.

He walked up the avenue and across the lawn to the terrace facing the front of the mansion. Here, to his surprise, he found the large hall door wide open. There were lights shining in numerous windows of the house, and the thought occurred to him to walk straight into the "haunted chamber," where he had heard the two detectives were quartered, and give them

the information direct, without arousing the inmates of the mansion.

"No doubt they have left the entrance door open for the sake of the fresh air this warm night," he said.

There was no one about so he stepped into the hall and coughed and waited a moment, but there was no response.

The door leading into the haunted room was right in front of him. He hesitated a minute, and then walked across and opened it. A light burned dimly; near the window he saw a figure sitting in a chair.

"Is that you, Mr Bruce?" he asked in a hesitant and apologetical tone of voice.

There was no response.

"He must be asleep," he whispered to himself. "And no wonder," he continued, "seeing the time that they have been up, and the knocking about they have had. It looks more like Bruce than Seymour. I will touch him and awaken him."

Anyone who has placed his hand upon the body of a corpse will know how different the feeling is when compared with warm, palpitating flesh. On feeling the shoulder, Mr Broadford was startled and at once turned around to look at the face.

"My God!" he whispered, "it's Raymond Ballantyne."

He stood for a moment in the dim light gazing at the fearful thing in front of him, and then turned and fled. Once outside the big white gates and clear of the grounds he breathed more freely, but his lips were compressed, and he quickened his pace homeward.

"That awful place!" he ejaculated. "The Septimus Dorset episode was bad enough, and now the detectives are gone, and in their room there is the ghost or corpse of Raymond Ballantyne. Mystery and horror upon horror!"

"Whatever is the matter with you?" exclaimed

Alice when her brother staggered rather than walked into the parlour where she sat waiting for him.

"Bring me some brandy, Alice," he said.

Without a word she hurried into the dining-room for the spirit.

"I am faint and exhausted," he said; "don't ask any questions until the morning."

When the morning came, however, he was just as reticent. "I was feeling tired and ill," was all that his sister could get out of him. The fact was, his previous experience of the mystery of "Storm-Cliff Towers" had been sufficient to determine him to keep his own counsel; he had seen no one, and as far as he knew had not been seen, so whether what he had seen, or felt, was ghost or corpse, he would not be drawn further into the ghastly affair.

"Good heaven!" he exclaimed to himself, "to think of the crimes that must have been committed in that house. What an inheritance for a woman!"

Mr Broadford was not wrong in regard to "Storm-Cliff Towers" being a strange inheritance for a woman, although he knew but a very small part of what there was to know. Yet it is women who more often than not become the possessors of the results of crimes which men have committed, and under such burdens there are few men who will carry themselves with the composure and patient fortitude which most women will. They who under the little ills of life show impatience and petulance so quickly, will often, when confronted by a series of overwhelming disasters and misfortunes, display quiet, patient heroism, which commands attention and respect.

When Beatrice was made aware of the full details of the story which the detectives had to tell, and knew that the corpses of her uncle and late legal adviser lay in the north-end chamber of the house, she was horrified, and felt that the burden was greater than she could bear. Fortunately Dr Strong was

much better, and he and Grace were able to advise her, and the painful incidents associated with the inquest were made as little distressing to her as possible. She bore up wonderfully under the shock.

The inquest, which was held in a room of the only hotel that the village boasted, lasted for two days, the jurors spending an afternoon in the inspection of the fateful bedchamber and its surroundings, from which two men at least had descended to their death. The proceedings were greatly protracted through the difficulty of the jurors arriving at a verdict; the detectives being simply staggered at the position, for there was absolutely no evidence forthcoming which could be successfully used in support of a charge of alleged murder against Skinner. Mrs Dalbert was still at large. By the advice of his solicitor, Skinner gave no evidence in the case, he being under arrest, on a charge of murder. But the question suggested to the jury was, how could it be proved to have been murder? Neither the dry, mummified form of Raymond Ballantyne, nor the battered corpse of Septimus Dorset, showed proof of murder or act of premeditated violence.

Raymond Ballantyne might have died a natural death, and Septimus Dorset might have met his death by accidentally falling into the shaft of the blow-hole. They were twelve men of ordinary intelligence, and they spent hours in carefully considering the case, but after all their deliberations they could not find it on their consciences to return other than an open verdict. But the police had already had Skinner before the Police Court, and somehow managed to keep him under arrest.

A clever lawyer would no doubt have elicited more from Miss Ballantyne, but she was in a weak state of health and much distressed over the painful affair, and was asked but few questions.

The detectives did not press matters, for they were anxiously hunting for Mrs Dalbert, and they intended

to reserve their strength for the trial; they had obtained two remands in the case of Skinner, and bail was refused. In their experience of crime and criminals they had never met with a more baffling case; everything pointed to a carefully planned and cleverly executed series of crimes, and yet there was thus far no actual proof that any crime had been committed, and it was possible that even the arrest of Mrs Dalbert might not yield any fresh evidence of importance.

Probably there had never been a case more exasperating to the public mind in the criminal records of the colonies. It was a mystery of the first order, and most people wanted to prove that it was a criminal mystery, but unfortunately the evidence fell short.

However, the deaths of two men were to be accounted for, and the police hoped that they could rake up sufficient evidence to convict Skinner; so by dint of unusual effort they secured his committal for trial at the ensuing quarter-sessions, and not only the legal world, but the general public, awaited anxiously the outcome of the trial. Dr Strong, Miss Ballantyne, Grace Strong, the Rev. Christopher Broadford, Donald Dorset, and a number of other witnesses were served with subpœnas to appear and give evidence.

The one thing which especially irritated the curious was that the subterranean caves, etc., below "Storm-Cliff Towers," were not accessible to outsiders. Adventurous individuals risked their lives in attempting to discover the means of access from the rocks, and on calm days, at low tide, all sorts and conditions of men might have been seen groping about on the look out for the entrance to the underground passage, but, strange to say, either their pluck or sagacity failed them, for no one seemed able to discover it.

The fact was, the rugged front which the rocks presented to the ocean was so seamed and scarred and indented with caves and fissures, that it was a matter

of no ordinary hazard to attempt to find the place at all. Yet foolhardy individuals persisted in the search upon the slippery surfaces, with the great rollers of a treacherous sea breaking behind them, until the police were compelled to put up notices warning the public off the dangerous quest.

Beatrice, on Dr Strong's advice, stoutly refused any access to the subterranean rooms from "The Towers." The police were the only persons who were allowed entrance to the apartments associated with the mystery, and William was occupied for days together in defending the place against crowds of reporters, and photographers, and curious individuals who came prepared with all the necessary appliances to take photographs of the bedroom, the lift, and caves, and even the subterranean blow-hole; and great was their astonishment and indignation at being met with a refusal. As it was, photographs of Miss Ballantyne's inheritance appeared in every illustrated journal in the colonies, and any fresh news concerning "The Mystery of 'Storm-Cliff Towers'" proved the best means for weeks of working off a late edition of the evening paper.

Dr Strong and "The Towers'" household were all of opinion that both Raymond Ballantyne and Septimus Dorset had met their deaths by unfair means. But the proof was wanting, and indeed also the motive to a crime on the part of Skinner; so in his own way Dr Strong set himself to discover more about the matter.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEATRICE AND THE DOCTOR

It was no doubt a tangled skein that Dr Strong had taken in hand to unravel, but he had several powerful incentives to perseverance. He had only narrowly escaped with his own life, for the hand that bound him when unconscious would undoubtedly, but for Mrs Dalbert, have left him there to die.

Then, too, his growing love for Beatrice urged him to seriously attempt the solution of the mystery; and once set upon it, he found to his intense satisfaction that the mistress of "The Towers" was as eager to obtain the solution of the mystery as himself, and that the pursuit brought him into very close and confidential intercourse with her.

Happy is the lover who can find a common subject of study or pursuit with the mistress of his heart, especially if its character is such as to lead her to defer to his judgment and experience, and cause her to look to him for continual advice and guidance. This was the present state of affairs at "The Towers," for both Beatrice, Grace, and the doctor had committed themselves to the investigation of the mystery.

It was a very good thing for Beatrice that events had so turned out, for in the doctor she had one to relieve her mind in regard to the part she had played in the case of Septimus Dorset.

"Did it never occur to you that Mr Dorset may have had far more knowledge of affairs down here

than he told you of?" asked the doctor one afternoon of Beatrice.

Beatrice had been telling him what she could remember of her interviews with Septimus Dorset, and she recalled the feeling which she had, at the time, of something having been kept back by him.

"My own opinion," said Dr Strong, "is that there has been a deeply laid plot, extending back over a number of years, and that the death of Septimus Dorset was almost as essential to its success as that of your Uncle Raymond. I would very much like to see this Owen Skinner; if he is the chief actor in this tragic series of crimes, he must be a remarkably clever and accomplished criminal."

Beatrice felt that the doctor was avoiding any reference to her own share in the tragic end of the lawyer, and hankered, with feminine pertinacity, for some expression of opinion from him.

"What do you think I should have done, doctor, when I discovered that there was a secret lift in the north bedroom?" she asked.

"Under the circumstances it was most difficult to have known what to have done. You had no friend to ask advice of except your lawyer, and he did not prove himself exactly a friend, nor as open and candid in regard to your late uncle's affairs as he might have been. It would no doubt have been better had you warned him, or in some way have put him upon his guard; but, as a lawyer, he ought to have been upon his guard, especially knowing what he did about the place and its surroundings, and your uncle's relations with Mrs Dalbert."

"You do not blame me, then, for bringing him out here that night?" said Beatrice softly.

"No, I don't," said the doctor stoutly; "at least, not under the circumstances. He knew that he had a difficult case in hand, and should have been upon his guard. Do you think that when a doctor is called in to attend some hard case that he is met with a

caution to be upon his guard, and protect himself against contagion? Not a bit of it; he has the case in hand professionally, and takes the risk."

Beatrice felt that there was a bit of sophistry in this special pleading of the doctor's, but it pleased her. She felt, too, that he, at any rate, was on her side, and something told her that he would think little of risking his life for her. In fact he was to be trusted out and out.

The days passed quickly, and although Dr Strong was quite recovered, he and his sister continued guests of Miss Ballantyne at "The Towers."

Neither Beatrice nor Grace were disposed to sudden likings, as some girls are; but in this case there was so much in their characters and dispositions which suited each other that what, at another time and under other circumstances, might have taken many months to develop, was accomplished in a few weeks. There was very little said and very little demonstration, but each felt that they were to the other as sisters, and that it was a friendship which would continue throughout their lives.

The doctor noted this with keen satisfaction, but said nothing to Grace. In fact, like most of the lasting attachments of life, it was a thing of intuition and feeling all around, rather than of words. Dr Strong knew that his love was given to Beatrice, and he hoped that it was to some extent returned; but neither by look nor word, in any way, was the emotion of the heart revealed.

In such a case, a man like the Rev. Christopher Broadford would have stumbled into a declaration in a week, and have spoiled everything; but not so the doctor. He would have the sacred dawnlight of love protracted as long as possible.

In lands where the sun lingers longest upon the threshold of the morn and eve, the day is longest. In these hot Australian lands the sun leaps into the heavens, and day commences its passionate life and

movement with scarcely any prelude or introduction; but in more northern regions the daybreak is a thing of deliberation and gradual development. And those sacred hours of sunrise, who would forgo? Love at first sight by no means demands a declaration at the first opportunity. The strongest souls are those that can wait, feeling the joy of loving and being loved, when, as the Psalmist puts it, "there is no speech nor language, and their voice is not heard." The divinest moments in Nature's life are those which precede the actual rising of the sun. And so with the noblest emotions of the heart and mind. It is the joy of days when two hearts beat in union and in silence which is longest and most dearly remembered. Alas for the impatience of life! How much it loses to the young and thoughtless and inexperienced. Not without suffering and self-denial and discipline is the highest good enjoyed.

Enough, however, has been said to indicate the state of affairs which seemed to be developing between Beatrice Ballantyne and John Strong. Yet how often in these matters have onlookers been mistaken!

It must not be imagined that the doctor entered into the ghastly details of "The Towers" mystery as a matter of ordinary conversation. It was only at set and opportune times that the subject was discussed, although it was probably seldom out of their thoughts.

. . . . . .

"Mrs Dalbert has been arrested at last," said the doctor gravely to his sister and Beatrice one afternoon, about a week after the inquest.

"I am almost sorry," said Beatrice.

"Because you think that she was the means of saving my life?" said John quietly.

"Yes," said Beatrice.

"I am sorry, too, on that account," said he; "but I think that without her there would have been a missing link."

"Where was she arrested?" asked Grace.

"In Sydney, and almost within a stone's-throw of a police station," said the doctor, smiling. "She will be brought up at the Police Court to-morrow, and we shall all have to appear as witnesses," he continued.

The result of the preliminary proceedings at the court the next morning was that Meta Dalbert was committed to take her trial with Owen Skinner for the wilful murder of Raymond Ballantyne.

CHAPTER XXV

A CONSULTATION

THE quarter-sessions at which Skinner and Meta Dalbert were to be tried was to commence in three weeks' time, but it was expected to be fully four weeks before the trial would come off, as the case was preceded by several others on the calendar.

Two days, however, after Mrs Dalbert's arrest, to the surprise of most people, she was liberated on bail, which was found by a leading firm of solicitors in the large sum of two thousand pounds.

"What does this mean?" asked the doctor of Bruce and Seymour, who had come to "The Towers" to consult with him in regard to the case.

"It means," said Bruce, "that there is more at the back of the affair in the shape of money than we had thought."

"Do you think, then, that this large sum has been found in actual cash and lodged with a bank for the protection of the solicitors who have given bail?" asked the doctor.

"I do," said the detective.

"It's Messrs Smooth & Stout who have given the bail; are they getting up the defence?" asked Dr Strong.

"They are," replied Bruce laconically.

"Then there will be one of the biggest fights the Sydney courts have seen for years past," said the

doctor. "How are the Crown Law officers getting on in preparation for the prosecution?"

"They have done nothing except to notify Savage that he will be retained to assist the Crown Prosecutor with the case."

"Then they are trusting entirely to you to get the case up?"

"Exactly."

The large amount of bail forthcoming for Mrs Dalbert, and the fact that Smooth & Stout of Pitt Street were taking charge of the case, somewhat staggered the three men, and for some time they sat and smoked together in silence.

Said the doctor at last: "You two have no doubt thought out a theory of your own, and possibly have gathered a considerable amount of evidence; I would like, however, in a few words, to put the result of my own thoughts upon the case, and you can then make suggestions or ask questions. It is evident to me that the murder of Raymond Ballantyne was deliberately planned some years ago."

The doctor paused for a few moments as though struck by some sudden thought, and then continued:

"The work in and under the north chamber would take a long time to accomplish, in the slow way in which it must of necessity have been executed. It was carried on and completed, no doubt, during the absence of Mr Ballantyne in India; but it seems to me impossible that it can have been done by one pair of hands. If Skinner was the principal in the matter, he must have had assistance other than that which could have been afforded by Mrs Dalbert.

"You think, then, that there are others implicated, of whom we at present have no knowledge?" said Seymour.

"I do," replied the doctor; "and you detectives have to find them out, whether it be one or more."

"No one man alone devised and constructed the

mechanism of that lift; the weight alone would have been too much for him," said Bruce.

"What do you propose to do, then?" asked Dr Strong.

"Fix the most likely dates, and then advertise. It may be that the whole of the work was done as an ordinary piece of business by a local firm. This place is so isolated that it might have been done without any special effort at concealment, and yet no one in the neighbourhood have known anything about it."

"I don't think that was the way it was done," replied the doctor. "The risk would have been too great. But," he continued, "setting aside the way by which this costly piece of work was accomplished, if Raymond Ballantyne was murdered, why was he murdered, and why was the body preserved and kept in readiness for production at any minute?"

"What was the personality sworn under?" asked Seymour abruptly.

"Fifty-six thousand," replied Bruce.

"Was that, at the time, thought smaller than was expected?" asked the doctor.

"I cannot say," replied the detective.

"Some people around here thought it much smaller than it might have been," said the doctor quietly.

"Do you suggest that he may have had money hidden away?" asked Seymour.

"I do," said the doctor; "and I would very much like to know where that two thousand pounds sterling has come from."

"Do you think that old Ballantyne had money hidden away, and that possibly he knew of the apartment beneath 'The Towers,' and used it as a treasury or hiding-place?" asked Seymour eagerly.

"He was a very eccentric man, and it would have been quite in keeping with his general character and disposition," replied the doctor cautiously.

"We have searched the place below with the

greatest care," said Bruce, "and have found nothing."

"I think that you will have to search there still further," said the doctor. "I cannot conceive of that place having been developed as it is, with so much care and thought and purpose, unless it was intended for a hiding-place for something more than dead bodies. Why, man! you can hide a dead body in a common grave; but that place was meant to conceal something far more valuable and important, or I am very much mistaken."

"I gather then that in your opinion there may be money down there?" said Seymour.

"I do not say that there is now; but I am inclined to think that there has been," replied the doctor.

"Why do you suppose that?" asked Bruce.

"Well, I think it's plain enough," said Dr Strong. "Skinner could not get bail accepted for himself. It was necessary that one of them should go free for some matter of importance, so he has provided this large sum to secure Mrs Dalbert's liberty, so that she may carry something through which is likely to have important issues in connection with the trial. Mrs Dalbert, you will find, is only partially in Skinner's confidence, and she probably had no knowledge of the amount of actual cash secured by the death of Raymond Ballantyne."

"How do you think he was killed?" asked Seymour.

"Chloroformed while asleep," replied the doctor.

"How about the witness who swore at the first inquiry that he saw him jump over the rocks?" said Seymour.

"Probably it was Skinner he saw, dressed so as to personify the murdered man; they were about the same size, and Skinner, no doubt, knows every rock on the coast, and could easily have jumped over in the dusk, and made his way to the entrance of the secret passage from the rocks.

"It was seemingly a part of the plan to show that death had resulted from suicide, in a form by which the body was unlikely to be recovered. My opinion is that Miss Ballantyne came out and took possession of 'The Towers' before they were ready, and that Septimus Dorset knew so much of Mr Ballantyne's affairs that for the success of their plans it became advisable to get him out of the way. His unexpected visit to 'The Towers' furnished Skinner with the opportunity of getting rid of him, and probably he was drugged while asleep, taken below, and thrown down the shaft of the blow-hole. Now, what has to be done first of all is to discover by some means how these people have been, or are likely to be advantaged by the death of these two men."

"I believe that under the will Miss Ballantyne was sole heiress?" said Bruce.

"Yes, that is so," replied the doctor.

Some further talk made it clear to the doctor that, so far, the detectives had little evidence to go to a jury upon. They would, of course, prove the connection of both prisoners with the underground chamber where the two bodies were found; but, apart from Skinner's admission to the officer, which after all did not amount to much, and Mrs Dalbert's rescue of the doctor, there was very little to identify them with the crimes. Then, too, it was impossible to say what might be the nature of the defence set up. It was all in their favour that neither of the two bodies had shown signs of violence apart from what might have been received, in the case of Septimus Dorset, by a fall into the chasm of the blow-hole and the action of the sea-water upon the corpse.

"Don't you feel very anxious?" asked the doctor.

"Anxious, certainly; but by no means disheartened, or even discouraged," said Bruce. "I have secured many a conviction on evidence which turned up at the last minute, not infrequently in the court itself, during the course of a trial. It is my opinion that

if we can get either of them to go into the witness-box they will convict themselves under cross-examination. I do not despair, however, to get hold of some important evidence yet. All the papers connected with the estate are being gone carefully over, and a search for evidence is being made in the neighbourhood among the people who occasionally worked at 'The Towers.'"

"I should have Mrs Dalbert's movements carefully watched," suggested the doctor.

"She will be shadowed night and day," said Seymour.

"One word more," said Dr Strong. "I see that Skinner and Mrs Dalbert are to be tried for the murder of Raymond Ballantyne only; how about the death of the lawyer?"

"We could not well try them for two murders on the one indictment," said Bruce cautiously.

"Ah! that is so; but was not the corpse of poor Dorset terribly knocked about in the blow-hole, and so decomposed that there was difficulty over its identification."

"He was identified by his brother. Certainly the features were very much knocked about, but the question of identification was practically taken for granted. Dorset had disappeared, and his corpse was discovered in the underground caves below his bedroom. What more could you want? There was no one else missing."

"All right," said the doctor; "only you gentlemen sometimes take too much for granted when you are hot on the scent of a criminal. 'Better to be sure than sorry,' you know."

CHAPTER XXVI

A FRESH DISCOVERY

NEITHER Beatrice nor Grace had visited the subterranean apartment and caves below "The Towers," although they had both of them more than once expressed a wish to do so. The doctor, however, had shown no desire to gratify their curiosity, and the day of the trial drew near.

One morning Bruce and Seymour arrived unexpectedly at "The Towers" at a somewhat early hour. They wished to follow up a clue which they imagined they had got hold of, and asked for permission to make further investigations below. The doctor happened to be at home, so the ladies urged that they should form a party, and in company with the detectives, explore the much-talked-of caves and passages.

The tide was falling, so the blow-hole would not be working, which both the doctor and the detectives regarded as opportune for the search.

Only after some trouble was Dr Strong finally persuaded, however, to obtain the consent of Messrs Bruce and Seymour, which, although given with seeming alacrity, was really the cause of considerable annoyance to them. They stipulated, however, that before the ladies went down they should have a quarter of an hour to investigate below and see that everything was all right, and without any special danger to the ladies.

"Of course, no one can get access to the place now?" said Grace to her brother.

The doctor had thrown back the heavy curtains and drawn up the blinds on the large bay-window to let some sunlight into the room before the ladies entered. Soon after the three of them stood in the room together, awaiting the return of the detectives, who were still below.

"Is it not singular," said Grace, "that no one seems to have heard anything of the noise made by the working of the underground blow-hole in this room."

"Perhaps they have," said Beatrice, "and in that way it is possible the first idea of a subterranean apartment below 'The Towers' was suggested."

"I do not think that very much could ever be heard here," remarked the doctor; "at high tide the roar of the ocean is so audible in anything like rough weather, that a similar sound below ground could scarcely be distinguished; then you must remember there is about fourteen feet of solid stone in which the lift works, and further, that the blow-hole is several hundred yards distant along a series of caves and winding rock passages. I don't think that much would ever be heard in this chamber. What does puzzle me, however, is that there is not a great draught around the edges of the lift when the blow-hole is working."

As the doctor said this, a motion of the fireplace and hearth made itself visible, and the platform of the lift commenced to descend.

Beatrice started involuntarily; it recalled to her mind the night on which she had first been startled by its strange motion. How much had happened since then!

A few minutes afterward it re-ascended with Bruce upon it, and the two ladies and the doctor went down together.

It was still two hours to noon and the rays of bright warm sunshine illuminated the apartment from which

they had descended, but below the darkness stretched away from the lamp and candle lights, and the whole surroundings were suggestive of those who love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.

"What an uncanny sort of place!" exclaimed Grace.

The doctor was very quiet; he was thinking of the hours of darkness he had spent there, which had so nearly cost him his life.

"You should know the place best," said the doctor to Seymour, "you had better act as guide."

They had already made a survey of the apartment directly below the bedchamber, and the detective pointed out the spot where the first corpse was found.

"Let us see the caves now, and the shaft of the blow-hole," said Beatrice, taking Grace's arm, and shuddering slightly.

Detective Bruce led the way, and Seymour accompanied the ladies, while the doctor brought up the rear. Each of the party carried a light, and after they had passed into the right-hand cave the doctor lagged behind, carefully examining some marks he had noticed upon the wall.

Suddenly they heard an exclamation from him as though he was calling to them for assistance.

In a minute the whole party had gathered around the doctor, with their lights thrown upon the surface of the wall of the cave in front of them.

It should be explained that the walls generally, in the large cave or apartment, were singularly smooth, as though portions of the limestone had been taken off in large flakes and then at some remote period polished by the action of the sea.

"There is a door here," said the doctor; "an iron door, too."

The listeners stood breathless as the doctor gave it a smart tap with a walking-stick which he held in his hand. It was certainly a door. There was no handle,

or fastening, or keyhole visible, however, and the thin line which showed where the door reached to was fully six feet from the floor. It shut square upon an angle, so that no upright crack showed on the front of the wall; and the whole thing was so skilfully contrived that a very careful search of the place might have been made without its being discovered. A close examination of the floor showed signs of traffic, however, and the men eagerly searched around for some means of opening it.

"What do you think of it?" said Grace to her brother as he stood there buried in thought.

"I think the mystery thickens," he replied.

An exclamation from Bruce at this moment called their attention to him. He had been examining the other side, where the door abutted on to the passage leading to the second cave. Here, about eight inches from the corner, was a small slit or hole chiselled out of the limestone, evidently a keyhole, about three feet above which were five dates, one under the other, lightly scratched upon the surface of the wall. The two last dates were recent and within a fortnight of each other; the one on the line above them twelve months earlier; and the other two almost following each other, but three years before.

Lights were held by the detectives against these scratches upon the wall, as the party read them with absorbed attention. The figure "5" was twice repeated; it was made just as Raymond Ballantyne had been used to making his fives. The same thought was in the three men's minds, that a portion of the writing might be Raymond Ballantyne's, or an imitation of it.

"He had been dead for twelve months then," said the doctor, answering the unspoken question of his companions.

"And look at this date," he said, pointing to the last one; "it is either a remarkable coincidence, or —no!" he suddenly exclaimed, pointing to one above

it, "that was when poor Dorset came down here, and this was the date of my descent; the one before it was no doubt when Raymond Ballantyne met with his death."

"I think that we had better return again," said Beatrice, whose face looked somewhat pallid, as also did that of Grace. "This place feels close, and you might prefer to be alone if you intend to break the door open."

"The door can wait, Miss Ballantyne, if you would like to further explore the caves and passages," said Bruce; but it was evident that all were eager to have this important discovery followed up at once, and the ladies were taken upstairs again. The doctor went with them, for they were both greatly excited by what had transpired.

"What an awful house this is," said Beatrice, shuddering.

"And yet you wish, if possible, to get to the very bottom of this mystery?" replied Grace.

"Certainly! At whatever cost. But I could never settle to live here after this."

"And yet nothing is proved, so far," said the doctor. "But I think we shall know something more within a few hours. After lunch we propose to take William and the gardener down with us, and if we cannot pick the lock of that door, we will burst it open with a crowbar."

After a hasty lunch, the party of men, now five in number, descended below. The writing was first copied lest any hammering upon the door might injure it.

"Now bring the keys," said Bruce to William.

It would have been amusing, under other circumstances, to have watched the eager, expectant faces of the men as the detective manipulated those keys. Among them were keys of almost all sizes and patterns, and also a skeleton-key with which Bruce had more than once made himself master of a difficult

lock. But in this case every attempt failed, until, after nearly an hour of effort and perspiration, and impatience on the part of the onlookers, Bruce said, "Bring the crowbar, William."

This proved to be an irresistible argument in the hands of the expert detective, and within a few minutes he had wrenched the heavy door open.

It swung noiselessly back upon well-oiled hinges, revealing only a dark passage cut out of the solid rock.

"I think that you two had better remain here while the officers and myself go in and examine this place," said Dr Strong; "if we should want your assistance we will call."

For a full half-hour after the doctor and detectives had disappeared down the narrow entrance passage, William and Joe waited.

What it was that occupied the attention of the three, and kept them away so long, will have to be reserved for another chapter. Sufficient at present to say, that their faces betokened gratification as well as perplexity on their return. The detectives had obtained a clue at last, but not that which they had hoped for.

That night, to the surprise of the servants, a bed was placed in the ground-floor library of the North Tower. The room had not been slept in since the arrival of Miss Ballantyne from England, and the women-folk among the servants were full of curiosity to know why a detective should sleep there.

The whole household guessed, however, that this step was the result of something which had been discovered that day. Possibly there was a secret access to this room from the freshly found passage. But they said nothing, having been cautioned by the detectives to hold their tongues.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER

"We are impatient to know what was found behind the newly discovered door," said Beatrice, when she met the doctor afterwards in the dining-room.

"Only, if very unpleasant, please don't tell us until we have dined," interposed Grace.

The doctor smiled, but did not at once speak. It had taken him some time to rid his hands and person of the dust and grime acquired during the afternoon's exciting search, and he had only now met the ladies, for the first time, after the adventures referred to in the previous chapter.

"There is no doubt about our having made a discovery," he answered; "but you know my rule about the character of conversation suited to the dinner-table. I think that we had better adjourn it, as an unpleasant and too exciting topic, until we have satisfied the cravings of hunger. Dear me! how hot it is; may I open the window, Miss Ballantyne?"

The conversation at this turned very naturally to the weather, for the day had been one of those hot, dry, stifling days which are rarely experienced in Sydney.

"There must have been a hot wind blowing," said Grace; "the whole place is as dry as tinder."

"It's a great bonfire night in England," said Beatrice.

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor, "I had forgotten the date; it's the fifth of November."

The idea seemed to jar unpleasantly upon his mind, and although he attempted to join in the conversation, which now turned upon a comparison between the month of November in England and in Australia, he was evidently ill at ease, and preoccupied with his thoughts.

He excused himself somewhat abruptly after dinner, and took a turn with Seymour, who was to sleep in the tower room; they were evidently discussing something with much earnestness.

He joined the ladies in the drawing-room, and with very little introduction plunged into an account of what they had found behind the secret door.

"It's singular," he said, "that this should be the fifth of November, for this afternoon we discovered a veritable gunpowder plot below 'The Towers.'"

"A gunpowder plot?" exclaimed the two ladies in the same breath.

"Yes; found several barrels of blasting powder down there, and some packages which look suspiciously like explosives. There is an iron chest there, too, which we tried hard to open, but we had to give it up until Detective Bruce brings a man and locksmiths' tools with him to-morrow from Sydney. We expect, then, to find valuable information and evidence."

"But," said Beatrice, in evident alarm, "suppose the house should be blown up to-night? Do you think it is safe to remain here?"

"I have thought the whole matter over carefully," replied the doctor, "and discussed it with Seymour, and it seems to us that there is absolutely no cause for alarm. The passage we discovered connects with the ground-floor room in the North Tower, where we found a door cunningly contrived at the side of the fireplace, and so situated as almost to defy discovery, unless someone had taken the trouble to measure the

thickness of the wall. However, Detective Seymour will sleep to-night in that room, so that it will be impossible for anyone to get access below, as I shall watch the front room myself. I did think of suggesting that you should not stay here to-night; but, really, we run no more risk, indeed less, to-night than we have for months past. It must be borne in mind, too, that anyone getting access below, with the intention of destroying the place, would themselves be destroyed."

"Let us have some music, John," said Grace abruptly, "and try to forget unpleasant subjects for a while; it is evident that we cannot leave 'The Towers' to-night. I have no doubt it will be all right, only the thought of what may be below is certainly not pleasant. We may be thankful that, like the original Gunpowder Plot, this one has also been discovered."

The ladies played and sang, but soon gave it up, and the conversation recurred again to the topic which was uppermost in their minds.

The doctor was uncommonly restless; he would occasionally make a tour of the north end of the mansion, which was brilliantly lit with lamps and candelabra. The repose of the whole place reassured him, however, and he would look out to see that Detective Seymour's light was burning in the North Tower room. So, satisfied, he would return again to his sister and Beatrice in the drawing-room, and make some excuse for having left them. They all felt it to be a very good thing that the matter had been kept secret from the servants.

It was past ten o'clock, but there was no thought of retiring to rest. The trial was to commence during the ensuing week, and they were discussing the probable effect of the new discovery upon the evidence, and the fate of the prisoners, when Grace interjected:

"They must have intended to blow the whole place up and destroy any evidence below." The words had

scarcely escaped her lips when a voice was heard in the entrance hall calling loudly for the doctor.

"What is it?" he cried, hurrying out, closely followed by the ladies.

"Doctor," said Seymour, for he it was, "some devil has fired the gully; the trees are already alight, and the wind is blowing dead on to the house."

"Grace, call up the servants, and send the men down to us at once," exclaimed Dr Strong. He hurried out into the conservatory, where fire-buckets, filled with water, always stood in readiness, and, seizing one in each hand, hurried on to the terrace overlooking the valley, closely followed by the detective with other buckets, and Beatrice, who in her excitement followed them.

The thickly timbered hill-side below them was already a mass of flames.

The rapidity with which the fire had travelled seemed almost incredible to the beholders, and for a moment the men stood spell-bound by the suddenness and magnitude of the threatened disaster.

"If this is a move of the other side," said Seymour grimly, "they take big risks. I have been wondering who can have done it. I'll slip up to the summit of the tower and see if I can make out anyone in the clear space beyond the timber."

In the meantime, the doctor, who was now joined by the menservants, hurried down among the trees to see what might be done to fight the flames. They had pulled up some green bushes with which, if possible, to beat them out; but it was soon evident to them that any attempt to combat the fire by these means was hopeless. The whole surface of the ground was carpeted with a thick layer of pine and fir needles, which, under the hot wind, burnt with the heat of a furnace, while the flames leaped among the boughs of the resinous trees in sheets of fire. It was impossible for a human being to withstand the fierceness of the heat

in any close proximity, and the doctor and servants hurriedly retraced their steps to the terrace.

They were protected here for the moment by the thick masses of trees which covered the ground below them, although everyone knew that in a few minutes that very barrier would be turned into a seething mass of lurid flames.

As Seymour descended from the tower and joined the congregated household, now gathered on the terrace, the scene was such as might never be forgotten. Hundreds of terrified birds, which had found a nightly lodgment in the branches of the trees, flew blindly about, uttering cries of distress. The sharp explosions among the blazing timber, peculiar to a burning pine forest, sounded like the rattle of miniature artillery, above which, however, was heard the perpetual roar of the ocean against the rocks.

"Let Lucy and the other women help you to secure your valuables," said the doctor to Beatrice and Grace; "and be prepared for the worst. They are about falling some of the trees nearest the house, but I am afraid that when it gets higher up the hill, the force of the wind will increase its violence, and cause it to spread far more quickly. The only hope for 'The Towers' is for the wind to change to the south—but that is not very likely."

Only a few minutes had as yet transpired since the discovery of the fire, but its progress had been such that its origin was seen to have been no accident, for the trees were on fire all along the creek, which could not have been the case had the fire originated in one place alone.

The axes were not so sharp as they might have been, and it was soon evident that very little could be done to stop the progress of the conflagration by falling the timber, so an effort was made to protect the northern end of the mansion by dashing water about and placing wet blankets over some of the exposed woodwork; but by this time there were liter-

ally hundreds of trees blazing, and the fire having reached to higher ground, the strong wind fanned it to an almost white heat.

In what seemed to the beholders less than a minute, it seized hold of a branching avenue of pines which led up to the main avenue and to the whole surrounding hill-side. Probably such a thing was never seen before. Those who looked at it stood aghast; for, like some exhibition of a set piece of fireworks, the flames travelled almost instantaneously from avenue to avenue until fully half a dozen acres of great fir and pine trees, by which "The Towers" were surrounded, shot out in one encircling mass of flame.

From the adjoining village of Storm-Cliff, fire-bells were now ringing, and little knots of people hurried down to see the work of destruction, or render what assistance they might. But both the doctor and the detective knew that all hope of saving "The Towers" must be abandoned.

"There is no chance," said the latter to the doctor, as a tongue of flame shot up from the stables. "The place will burn like a box of matches surrounded by this awful heat."

"But how far down will it go?" asked Grace, who stood near them.

The men started as they turned round and faced the speaker; in their excitement they had forgotten the explosives buried beneath the place.

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed the doctor. "I never knew such a thing; the whole place is simply belted with a huge bonfire. The sooner we are all out of the house the better, and the one only possible way of escape now is in the direction of the sea."

"William," he called out to the coachman, "don't stop to try and save anything more; tell everyone to get clear of the place at once if they love their lives."

It was only with difficulty that the last of the occupants made their way through the burning timber

towards the seacoast. In that direction many of the trees had been thinned away so as to afford glimpses of the ocean; but as they hurried along, their steps were hastened by the crash of falling timber, and the sparks from the burning branches overhead.

At a very short distance on the seaward side, the timber ceased to grow, and there in safety they turned to view the roaring conflagration on the hill above them.

It was very little that Beatrice had saved, as she stood leaning upon the doctor's arm. "Do you think the place will blow up?" she asked, trembling.

"I fear so," replied the doctor; "but let us cross the flat and go round by the beach, and get to Storm-Cliff by the high road south of the cemetery; we shall then be able to look down upon the place at a distance, and mark the extent of the damage. We might get a conveyance up there to take you to 'Steynbridge Cottage.'"

"I can walk," replied Beatrice; "perhaps Grace and myself had better go on and leave you to direct the people."

"There is no need," said Dr Strong; "Seymour is with the men, and there are plenty of them to look after the few things which have been saved. Take my other arm, Grace, and let us get over as quickly as possible. If the place is to blow up, I should like to see it from the higher ground."

They passed on, meeting occasionally with groups of spectators who watched the conflagration from a distance, knowing that any attempt at assistance could be of no avail.

"One of the most remarkable scenes I ever witnessed," they heard one man say to another as they passed a little group.

They were still pushing on to higher ground, when a rumbling sound above the roaring of the fire was heard, and then a crash; and turning round they saw, by the lurid light of the burning timber, the whole

of the stonework of the northern portion of the building, which was now a mass of flame, tottering, as the result of a great explosion.

"It has worked out as they wanted it to," said the doctor bitterly; "but if I mistake not, even the destruction of 'The Towers' will scarcely obliterate the evidences of their crime."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DAY OF TRIAL

Time, which waits for no man, at last brought around the day of trial, and seldom had the Sydney law courts witnessed a more crowded or excited scene. Tickets for admission had been issued in view of the throngs of people who were determined, if possible, to be present.

As is usual on such occasions when the community has been carried away by a sensation or a craze, the published facts of the case had been very much exaggerated. Mrs Dalbert's picture had got into the papers, and her beauty and irresistible charm had been wonderfully expatiated upon. Of Owen Skinner very little had been gleaned by the most ubiquitous reporter. Except to his legal advisers he was doggedly silent.

But it was the burning of "Storm-Cliff Towers" that had specially aroused the interest of the general public. The story of the secret mine of explosives, and the final catastrophe when the fire reached the gunpowder, had been graphically told in the *Press*. Hundreds had travelled out to see the ruins, and, in truth, a more complete and terrible overthrow of a fine old family mansion it would be hard to imagine. The fierce conflagration had licked up all before it.

Of the grand old trees, the great gates, the fences, summerhouses, and other adornments of the grounds,

little remained but a few charred and blackened stumps. A large fountain of stonework, more apart from the trees, had escaped; but the paint and plaster on the upper portion of it was scarred and blistered by the heat. The mansion itself was a heap of blackened ruins, for after the fire, the explosion completed the work of destruction.

Immediately the fire was over and the ruins sufficiently cool for men to work among them, an effort had been made to excavate below the north end to obtain, if possible, some further evidence for the prosecution. But the explosion had done its work effectively. The whole of the cave and chamber below the haunted bedroom had been completely shattered, and they had searched for the great chest, so far, in vain.

Not that the quest had been given up, for at the very time the crowds were besieging the court-house to gain admission, a party of men on double wages, and with the prospect of a large reward if successful, were searching for any evidence which might strengthen the case for the Crown.

"Order in court," called out an official as the clock hand approached the hour of ten, and the clerk entered to call over the names of those who had been summoned to attend as jurors.

Immediately afterward the Judge and his associate entered and occupied the dais of justice, above which was the canopy and royal coat-of-arms.

To those accustomed to such scenes it was noticeable that there was far less of the solemnity which usually attaches to a trial upon a capital charge than is usual. The mystery of "Storm-Cliff Towers" had assumed such a complicated aspect that the fact of two lives being at stake seemed to be lost sight of. The question with the public was "What is the solution of the mystery?"

That there would be some very sensational evidence was taken for granted, for it had leaked out that the

prosecution was confident of gaining a verdict, so strong was their case.

However, Barrister Horatio Jones, Q.C., and Barrister Broughton, who had been retained by Smooth & Stout for the defence, entered the court and took their places at the table with a very confident air, and nodded across to the learned Crown Prosecutor and Barrister Savage with much cordiality. The senior of the firm of solicitors was also in attendance, and immediately after the entrance of the Judge he held a whispered consultation with the accused, who were already in the dock.

Mrs Dalbert was richly but tastefully dressed, and after the first shock had passed, looked around the court with a curious, half-defiant air. Her face was both graver and whiter than usual, and evidenced anxiety, if not for herself, for her companion. She was looking around the court for Beatrice and Grace, but neither were there, as both had been summoned as witnesses, and waited in an ante-room until their names were called.

Skinner was well dressed, and his not unpleasing face was commented upon favourably rather than otherwise. No one expected that the female prisoner would be convicted, whatever the evidence might be; she could not, it was thought, have taken any part in the actual murders—in fact, the lady had already received two proposals of marriage from ardent but unknown admirers, who were prepared to take her to their hearts and change her name on the first available moment after her release.

Preliminary matters being over, the names of the jurors were called. The first that responded was a stout, red-faced man who might have been either a publican or a cattle-dealer. He looked severely at the prisoners as he passed the dock, hoping to frighten them into challenging him. He was dressed in homely tweeds, and carried in his hand a soft felt hat; he took his place and the oath unchallenged.

The next man was related to a resident of Storm-Cliff village, and was promptly challenged by the Crown on a sign from Detective Bruce, who, with Seymour, was carefully watching the proceedings.

The next juror that responded to his name wore a silk hat and frock coat, and evidently belonged to the upper strata of society.

"Challenged!"

The objection this time was from the defence.

"Good!" exclaimed a city man to another juror (both of whom were anxious to get off), "I have never known it to fail."

"What's that?" asked his friend.

"A silk hat and a frock coat in a criminal trial; you'll see now, every extra well-dressed man will be challenged by the prisoners."

Such actually proved to be the case; not a single man who could by any means be denominated "a swell" was allowed to take his place unchallenged. They evidently preferred to be tried by a jury who would have no special predilection in favour of position or wealth.

After the jury had been duly empanelled, the leading counsel for the defence requested that the female prisoner, against whom he said the evidence was very slight indeed, might be accommodated with a chair outside the dock. It would be more convenient, he said, for consultation, and he had every expectation that before the case had proceeded far she would be discharged. The Judge consulted for a moment or two with his associate, and then, in a quiet voice, firmly refused the request.

The barrister at this looked with an injured air across to the jury, as much as to say, "See, gentlemen, how we are treated, and at what a disadvantage the case for the defence is being conducted."

It was really to secure this effect, if possible, that he had made the request, and he sat down, hoping

that the jury had been duly biased in his client's favour thereby.

Mrs Dalbert was evidently quite equal to the occasion, for on the Judge's refusal, she placed her handkerchief before her eyes for a moment as though to hide her sense of humiliation and disappointment at the denial of her counsel's request.

It certainly did her no harm with the jury, for they were only human after all, as both judges and advocates well know, and a beautiful woman (who may be an innocent woman) sitting inside the grim, ugly spikes of a dock usually arouses a certain amount of sympathy in a jury; especially if they can believe that she feels her position so keenly that she weeps, while, indignant at the wrong done to her, she seeks to hide her tears.

However, after some slight additional delay, the Crown Prosecutor stood up to open the case, at which the crowded court-house settled down to listen, for it was a case of difficulty and importance he had in hand.

The learned counsel was a tall, thin man with a long face, high forehead, and sharp features. His eyes, which seemed somewhat too large for his face, were kept partially closed, as though he was reading something internally; but when aroused they fairly blazed upon a hostile witness or stupid jury.

He opened the case with a brief account of the supposed death of Raymond Ballantyne by suicide. At the time it had been thought strange that no trace of the body could be discovered, but failing any proof of murder, it was supposed that death had resulted as affirmed, and that the body had been devoured by sharks or had drifted out to sea. The male prisoner had been one of the witnesses at the inquest, and had there sworn to having followed Raymond Ballantyne from "The Towers," and seen him throw himself from the rocks. But it was evident now that this had not been the case, and that he had perjured himself

at the inquest; for the body of the deceased had been actually found many months after this disappearance, in a state of wonderful preservation, in a cave or room under the northern end of "Storm-Cliff Towers." He would prove that although Miss Beatrice Ballantyne was the heiress of her uncle, both the male and female prisoners were largely benefited by Raymond Ballantyne's death; that in fact a large treasure in money and other valuables had been concealed beneath "The Towers" during the lifetime of its former owner, and that both Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert, who were distant relatives of the deceased, were fully aware of both the existence of the treasure and the presence of the body.

There had, no doubt, been a remarkably skilful plot, which aimed not only at the death of the late owner of "The Towers," which had been accomplished, but which also aimed at wresting the whole property from the rightful heiress by a forged will. The latter part of the scheme had, however, been frustrated by the prompt manner in which Miss Ballantyne had taken possession of the property, and other events which had transpired in consequence. He would also show that a second murder had been committed in order to cover up, if possible, the evidence of the first, and that a third one had been attempted with the most callous disregard of the sacredness of human life.

He must ask them to go back in thought for a number of years. The murdered man was a younger brother of one of the early pioneers of the Colony, who had acquired land in the city of Sydney in the early days, and as a successful merchant had made a considerable fortune. Family troubles and the death of his wife made Raymond Ballantyne a reserved and somewhat retiring man. He had inherited "Storm-Cliff Towers'" property prior to the death of his wife, and rebuilt a portion of it, and was no doubt acquainted with the fact that there was a cave

below the north end of the house, and a means of access to it from the tower room on the ground floor, which had been used by him as a library. He lived a secluded life at "The Towers" after the death of Mrs Ballantyne, his relatives, Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert, being practically his only companions, except the servants of the household. He would prove that he was a secretive man, fond of hoarding money about his rooms and person, and these idiosyncrasies were well known to the prisoners.

He seemed, about this time, to have acquired the morphia habit, and would pass his time for hours together seated asleep in an easy-chair. With the avowed intention of shaking himself free of this habit, he had, about four years ago, made a lengthy trip to Europe and the East. It was known when he left Australia that it was unlikely that he would return for years. He had wealth and leisure, and, accompanied by a confidential manservant, proposed to visit the scenes of his childhood in England and Scotland, and make an extensive tour through India, where his cousin, the female prisoner, Meta Dalbert, then resided, having recently become a widow.

It should be noted that during this time the affairs of the deceased were left in the hands of the male prisoner and his solicitors, Messrs Bluntly, Blackham & Dorset. It was evidently now that the scheme for the murder of the deceased, on his return to Australia, was thought out and perfected.

"I shall prove," said the learned counsel, as he warmed to the subject, "that it was known to both the deceased and the prisoner that in the limestone formation were caves and passages, but I shall also prove that at this time the only access to them was by a narrow secret staircase from the library. The trap-door or lift from the bedroom was constructed during the absence of Raymond Ballantyne in Europe, and without his knowledge. It seems to have come

about in this way: when in Venice the deceased had his attention called to some very fine specimens of carved marble and terra-cotta mantelpieces, one of which he purchased and forwarded to the male prisoner with instructions to have it fitted up in his own favourite sleeping apartment. The large square of inlaid tile-work was a part of the design, and it seems to have been this which suggested to the prisoner the construction of a secret lift, such as have been known to exist in great houses and palaces in Russia and other countries.

"A desire to possess Raymond Ballantyne's hoarded wealth and become master of 'The Towers'" property had evidently fully taken possession of the prisoner's mind; but he shrank from a violent murder by mere brute force, and formulated an elaborate plan by which he would have the machinery at his command for carrying out any number of murders without personal violence.

"I shall prove to you that the prisoner is himself a skilled mechanic, and that with the assistance of two Italian workmen, who were brought out to erect the fireplace, the whole of this accursed murder trap was completed. I may say here in passing, that there is no evidence discoverable that these two foreign workmen ever left the Colony, or indeed 'Storm-Cliff Towers'—indeed two mysterious dates were found scratched upon the wall of the underground chamber, which, being followed by the dates of other murders, suggest that these unfortunate foreigners, having completed their work, met with an untimely end."

At this the learned senior counsel for the defence called the attention of his Honour to the fact that the prisoners were being tried for the murder of Raymond Ballantyne only.

Scarcely heeding the interruption, the Crown Prosecutor continued:

"It may be asked how this trap or lift could form

part of a plan to murder; let me explain that among intimates the deceased was often referred to as 'Raymond the Sleeper' on account of a singular propensity he had of falling asleep at unexpected and unseasonable times. In winter weather it was a common thing for him to sit in a favourite chair before a fire for hours when asleep. Unfortunately, gentlemen of the jury, the ingenious and expensive and cleverly constructed mechanism to which I refer has been cunningly destroyed, so that it is impossible for you to inspect it as I intended that you should have done. In fact, the diabolical cunning shown in this fearful crime reveals the possession of exceptional ability on the part of those who have planned and carried it out. The purpose of the lift was to remove the deceased, while asleep in a chair before the fire, to the subterranean apartment, and there suffocate him. The whole scene of the murder will readily present itself to your minds.

"The deceased had returned but a comparatively short time to Sydney, and taken up, in company with his cousin, Mrs Dalbert, his abode at 'Storm-Cliff Towers,' when he suddenly disappears from society, and is reported by the male prisoner to have committed suicide.

"The actual fact has, however, at last come to light, for instead of a suicide, it is now proved to have been a ghastly murder. On that fatal night the murdered man, supposing himself to have been surrounded only by a trusty and friendly household, sat in front of the fire dozing in his chair, when the treacherous lift descended, and chloroform, or some other powerful drug, was administered; and in the darkness of that fearful dungeon he was left to die. The very date of the crime was inscribed upon the wall by the callous-hearted murderer.

"At the inquiry which followed, the evidence of the male prisoner was given with much circumstantial sequence, and the wonder is how any man could

have thus calmly perjured himself, knowing that corpse, at the very time, to be beneath 'The Towers.' But that which followed seemed on the face of it more remarkable. With ample means available to get rid of the evidence of a crime, the corpse was embalmed and left there to testify to the falsity of the evidence of Owen Skinner at the inquiry.

"It is natural for us to ask: 'Why was the body thus preserved?' It seemed the act of a madman to perpetuate evidence which might at any moment rise up in judgment against him and consign him to the scaffold. The connection of the female prisoner with the crime, however, solves the mystery. I shall prove that while Owen Skinner wished to marry Meta Dalbert, she was violently averse to the union, so the corpse of the murdered man was actually kept by the male prisoner, ready for production at a moment's notice, to in some way prove the participation of the female prisoner in the murder. It was seemingly the one threat by which he was able to maintain the mastery, and mould the female prisoner to his will.

"The examination of the papers of the deceased has furnished further important evidence. A will has been discovered in the handwriting of the deceased, by which the whole of his real and personal estate was bequeathed to the female prisoner; the date is subsequent to that of the will under which the present proprietor holds possession, but the document is unsigned.

"I shall not at this stage attempt to open up the argument suggested by the existence of this document. It is impossible to believe the prisoners ignorant of its existence. They who would commit a greater crime would not hesitate to perpetrate a lesser one. Forgery is a light thing by the side of murder, and the numerous visits which were paid by both the prisoners to the late Septimus Dorset's office showed that the unsigned will was sought for, that the name

which would have made it valid might have been added in some way by the prisoners.

"It seems that the late Raymond Ballantyne had a liking for legal documents of his own drawing up, and on different occasions several draft wills were drawn by him to submit to his lawyers. It is probable that, but for the existence of this unsigned will, the late legal adviser of Miss Ballantyne and her uncle might never have met with his death in the darkness beneath 'Storm-Cliff Towers.' He was in the way of the successful carrying out of a deep-laid plot by which the male prisoner intended to make himself master of the inheritance."

At this point Barrister Horatio Jones sprang to his feet.

"I object, your Honour," he exclaimed, addressing the Judge with some warmth. "My learned friend is asserting far too much when he asserts that Septimus Dorset is dead, and that it was that gentleman's body which was produced at the inquest. I absolutely deny that this has been proved. They have not dared to introduce the name of the lawyer into the indictment, because in the decomposed state in which the corpse was found it was impossible to absolutely identify it as that of Septimus Dorset. Far too much, sometimes, is taken for granted by coroners. Without doubt Septimus Dorset disappeared from an apartment in 'Storm-Cliff Towers' under suspicious circumstances, but it was never proved to my satisfaction that it was that gentleman's body which was discovered in the caves below the north end of 'The Towers.' Let me remind my learned friend that it is very unsafe, especially in law, to judge by appearances. I assert that it is absolutely untrue that Septimus Dorset is dead, and it is quite within the range of possibility that we may produce him in court as a witness for the defence before this trial is concluded."

The sensation caused by this speech was tremen-

dous; even the Crown Prosecutor was somewhat staggered thereby. The Judge looked over in his direction, as though waiting for a rejoinder; but the learned counsel evidently found it safer to ignore the interruption, and hitching up his silk gown, rose to his feet and continued as follows:

"We now come upon a new and most mysterious element in connection with the tragedy. The female prisoner had lived for many years in India, and seemingly had become to some extent versed in the mysterious beliefs of the East. Cropping up here and there in the history of this crime, is a cat's-eye ring, which, it is clear, all the parties referred to believed to possess some remarkable occult influence. The deceased, in a memorandum found among his papers, warned the heiress to beware of any person she met with about 'Storm-Cliff Towers" who wore this cat's-eye ring.

"I shall prove, in the witness-box, that this ring has been seen upon the hand of the deceased, and also on the fingers of both the male and female prisoners. It has been discovered in the possession of the female prisoner, and will at the proper time be produced in court.

"However, notwithstanding all the skill and cunning of the prisoners, their clever plans miscarried; the will, which they no doubt intended should be discovered after the death of the deceased at 'The Towers,' had been somehow removed with other papers, and, unsigned, had been lodged for safe keeping with his solicitors. The real will placed Miss Ballantyne in possession earlier than the conspirators had expected, so it seems a plan was devised by them to terrify the inmates of 'The Towers' by the occasional appearance of the dead man's corpse in the chamber supposed to be haunted. It was a desperate and very hazardous device, and has really proved to be the means of the unearthing of this crime. Through the personal bravery of a medical

man, who I shall call as a witness, it was found that the supposed supernatural appearance in the north chamber was a hoax. In solving the mystery the doctor nearly lost his life; but the result has been the present trial.

"It is another illustration of how the most clever and deeply laid attempts of villainy are again and again frustrated by an overruling power; although the present case is the more remarkable, inasmuch as almost superhuman efforts were made to cover up the track and blind the criminal's trail. So far it is feared that the very spot where the murder was committed has been destroyed by explosives beyond all recognition. The masterly cunning and the singular precautions taken to obliterate the evidence will not, however, cause justice in this case to miscarry. The prisoners are surrounded by a network of evidence that links them both with this crime, which we shall proceed to prove by a number of unimpeachable witnesses. I will now call the first witness, George Beecham."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CASE FOR THE CROWN

On being sworn, George Beecham gave evidence substantiating the general result of the inquiry on the supposed suicide of the deceased. He identified the male prisoner, who had made himself very prominent in the matter of the supposed suicide of the deceased, and at the time was reputed to be interested personally in the late Raymond Ballantyne's will.

The defence allowed this witness to pass out of the box without cross-examination.

At this stage a number of documents were put in as exhibits, among which was the unsigned will, said to be in the handwriting of the deceased.

"May I ask your Honour," said Barrister Jones, Q.C., "what this document has to do with my clients? Before it can be admitted as evidence it must certainly be in some way proved to have some connection with one, or both of them, personally. For any proof to the contrary, my clients may be totally ignorant of the very existence of these documents, and in justice to them I object to their being admitted."

Considerable argument followed between counsel, and the Judge finally ordered them to be placed on one side, giving the prosecution the privilege of tendering them again at a later stage of the trial.

Detective Bruce was the next witness called. He

entered the box and took the oath with the respectful, business-like demeanour common to police-officers. He deposed to having conducted an unsuccessful search for the body of the deceased after his supposed suicide, and having afterward been called into the case on the disappearance of Septimus Dorset. He handed in a carefully prepared plan of "The Towers," showing the underground caves and passages which the police had discovered, the position of the subterranean blow-hole, etc.

There was some dispute as to whether this should be admitted as evidence, as it was shown that some portions were marked in red to give the position of places and events not within his own personal knowledge; and, pending the substantiating evidence of Detective Seymour and Dr Strong, it was withheld from the jury.

The evidence of this witness was mostly technical, and it was remarked among professional men present, that, with the exception of the evidence given concerning the behaviour and remarks of Skinner when arrested, he had not so far been positively connected by evidence with the crime.

Barrister Jones arose with dignity, and having adjusted his gown with great deliberation, proceeded to cross-examine the officer. It may be said that a barrister rarely oversteps the most rigid professional etiquette when examining a police-officer in the witness-box. The credibility of other witnesses may be called in question, but not that of an officer, without very serious cause. Thus it was that each felt it was a question of parry and thrust as to the actual evidence.

"You say that you found the male prisoner at work in his garden when you called to arrest him. Did he offer any resistance, or make any attempt at escape?"

"No."

"Did he not at once deny any knowledge of a

subterranean vault or chamber under the northern portion of the mansion?"

"Yes, but he revealed the fact of his personal knowledge of the vault and caves by offering to show me a way to save Detective Seymour's life if I would bargain to give him three hours' immunity from arrest or pursuit."

"Was there any witness to this alleged statement of the male prisoner's?"

"No."

"Had you before this cautioned him that anything he said might be used against him in case he was put upon his trial?"

"No."

"Did you regard his proposal as an admission of guilt?"

"Certainly."

"In what way, pray?"

"He offered to show me how to save Seymour's life, therefore he must have known all about the subterranean vault and passages."

"Supposing that we grant that he knew of the subterranean chamber, how does it prove any guilty knowledge of this alleged murder?" asked the barrister.

"How could he otherwise have known anything about the disappearance of Detective Seymour?" retorted the detective.

"But Seymour did not see him down there, and cannot in any way identify him personally with the underground chamber.

"I submit, your Honour," he said, turning to the Judge. "The prosecution cannot bring this in as evidence. The alleged statement is allowed by the witness to have been made before he cautioned the prisoner, and, further, it is stated to have been made when the life of the prisoner was threatened by a revolver. It is impossible that such a statement can be admitted as evidence against the prisoner, and I

must ask your Honour to direct the jury accordingly."

This was done, the Judge strengthening the position of the defence by eliciting the fact that when charged before Detective Seymour with having made this admission, the prisoner stoutly denied having said anything of the sort.

The learned counsel for the defence sat down with evident satisfaction. He had managed so far to keep out of the case a very awkward piece of evidence, and, moreover, he had done it without in any way showing his hand to the other side.

Dr Strong was called as a witness, much to his sister's relief, before Beatrice. Grace wanted the doctor to be present in the court while her friend gave evidence, for she feared that the strain might be too much for her.

On being sworn, Dr Strong made a statement, at the request of the Crown Prosecutor, which covered the whole history of his knowledge of matters from the time of the return of the deceased from his European tour. Barrister Jones, Q.C., watched him with close interest, for he regarded the doctor as the most difficult witness he had to deal with, and he was preparing himself for a very severe cross-examination. Mr Smooth, of the firm of solicitors acting for the defence, also sat at the table, and Barrister Broughton took voluminous notes of the doctor's evidence. Aided by the occasional questions of the Crown Prosecutor, the doctor gave a very clear, full, but terse account of the whole affair, so far as it had come within the range of his observation and personal knowledge. It came out that he had once attended Skinner in his professional capacity, and had kept a pretty close eye upon him for years.

"We don't want your opinions, Dr Strong," interjected Barrister Jones, "but your facts."

He had just before objected to the recital by the doctor of old Sarah's story about her having seen

Skinner come up from below "The Towers" carrying bags of earth, which had resulted in the exclusion of that part of the evidence as mere hearsay. His account of the visit of the Rev. Christopher Broadford to "The Towers" was listened to with great attention by the crowded court, but when he vividly described his own midnight adventure in the haunted chamber the excitement was intense.

"You say that the revolver was wrenched from your hand?" queried the Crown Prosecutor. "Was the action accompanied by violence?"

"Yes; I was immediately struck a heavy blow."

"With the revolver?"

"No, it was more like a fist."

"Then," said the counsel, "it was not a woman, the female prisoner for instance, that struck you?"

"I did not see my assailant; but it could not, I think, have been a woman."

Other evidence followed, and at last the Crown Prosecutor sat down and made way for the opposing Q.C. to cross-examine the witness.

"Will you swear that it was not a woman that struck you and snatched the revolver from you during the encounter on that lift below 'The Towers'' chamber?"

The doctor hesitated a moment, and then said, "No, I will not swear that it was not a woman."

"My client, Mrs Dalbert, is proved, you say, to have knowledge of this secret means of access to 'The Towers.' Will you swear that it was Mrs Dalbert who assaulted you?"

"I will not," replied the doctor, who now saw the drift of the barrister's cross-examination.

"Your sister and Miss Ballantyne are friends?" said the counsel, breaking new ground.

"Yes," replied the witness quietly.

"You claim friendship yourself with Miss Ballantyne?"

"Yes."

"Is Miss Ballantyne's possession of this property likely to advantage you or your sister in any way?"

"Not that I am aware of," said the doctor with dignity.

"You have lived in the house?"

"I was Miss Ballantyne's medical adviser, and met with a serious accident in the house, and was nursed by my sister at 'The Towers' until recovery."

"Don't lose your temper, Dr Strong. You are her to answer any proper questions that are put to you. I asked you whether you had lived in the house, and wish you to answer 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"Yes," replied the doctor, restraining himself with an effort; for it was evident that the other side was treating him as a hostile witness.

"Have you ever had any unpleasantness in any way with Mr Skinner during your residence at Storm-Cliff?"

"No, certainly not; I attended him on one occasion during a slight illness."

"He paid your fee all right?"

"Certainly he did."

"Prior to this affair, did you not regard him as a straight-going, honest man?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that sufficient evidence will be forthcoming to convict him of this crime?"

"No; but——"

"That is quite sufficient, doctor," said the counsel, interrupting him; "you have given your evidence with excellent judgment and straightforwardness." At this Barrister Jones, Q.C., sat down.

"Wait a moment or two," said the Crown Prosecutor, as Dr Strong was about to leave the witness-box.

The learned counsel conferred for a moment with his junior before addressing the doctor. He was seeking for information upon a particular point of evidence.

"Can you give the exact date of the night referred to?"

"It was Tuesday evening, the first of August," replied the doctor.

"Thank you, that is quite sufficient," he said, looking across with a smile at his opponent barristers. "Call Mabel Scott."

After the usual preliminary questions, the Crown Prosecutor asked the girl, who had commenced to cry on seeing her mistress in the felon's dock, whether she remembered Tuesday, the first day of August, on which she replied in the affirmative.

"Where were you on that evening?"

"At the Theatre Royal with my mistress, Mrs Dalbert," replied the girl.

"You will see then, gentlemen," said the barrister, turning to the jury, "it is impossible that the female prisoner could have been in two places at one time on that night."

After a few more questions had been put to this witness, she was allowed to leave the box, the learned Barrister Jones judiciously deciding to leave her alone.

"Beatrice Ballantyne," was next called.

The doctor had suggested to Beatrice that she should only reply to questions, and not proffer any information unasked, which advice she, very wisely for her own comfort, strictly adhered to.

The prosecution attached great importance to the evidence of the mistress of "The Towers," and the Crown Prosecutor showed some slight impatience at her evident unwillingness to say more than was absolutely necessary. He, however, skilfully led her up to the incident in the haunted chamber, when, in company with Grace Strong, she saw the lift descend and immediately return with Mrs Dalbert and the inanimate body of Dr Strong.

"You swear that you heard a man's voice speaking to the female prisoner. What were the first words you heard said?"

"'You take a tremendous risk, Meta, to do this in broad daylight.'"

"What was the reply of the female prisoner?"

"'If you are afraid, I'll go up with him alone. He will be dead in another hour or two unless he has proper assistance.'"

"Did you hear any further conversation between the two voices?"

"Yes," replied Beatrice, who then repeated all that was said, as already recorded.

"Was anyone with you to corroborate your evidence?"

"Miss Strong."

"After this what happened?"

Beatrice described the appearance of Mrs Dalbert, and repeated as nearly as possible what she had said to them.

"Do you recognise that person in the court?"

Beatrice bowed.

"Do you swear that the female prisoner is the person you then saw, and who then spoke as you have described?"

"Yes," replied Beatrice.

"Would you recognise the voice of the man which you heard that afternoon if you again heard the words spoken by him?"

"I do not think that I could swear to the voice."

Skinner was now asked to read the words attributed to him, as written by the counsel on a piece of paper. He did so without hesitation, in a full, clear voice, heard distinctly through the court.

"I cannot swear that that was the voice," said Beatrice.

There was one thing, however, which she might perhaps have sworn to, but the clever counsel had not the information which would have led him to put the question. Beatrice looked across to the dock after Skinner had done reading. The four fingers of the prisoner's left hand rested upon the ledge of the dock.

She started as she saw them, for they seemed to her exactly the same as those she had seen in the firelight when the lift had first descended on the eventful evening of that day on which she had taken possession of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

The counsel for the defence noticed the involuntary gesture, and it was on the tip of his tongue to ask her what it was that had caused her to start, but a second thought restrained him. He was experienced enough, as a barrister, to know that while speech may be silvern in some cases—and not a few—silence is golden; but he did not know what a narrow escape he had had of bringing to light evidence which would have been both damaging to his client and extremely unpleasant for the witness.

Grace Strong was called, but her evidence threw no further light upon the matter, and her place in the witness-box was taken by the Rev. Christopher Broadford.

There was nothing of special interest about the clergyman's evidence until he arrived at the incident where he had gone up to "The Towers" with the intention of informing the detectives that he had just met Mrs Dalbert going to "Fernville." His description of how he then saw the mummified corpse of the late proprietor of "The Towers" was told with much circumstantial detail. It was really of very little importance as evidence, for the existence of the corpse had been amply proved. The reverend gentleman was dismissed, and the counsel called for documentary evidence, by which he hoped to prove how the prisoners had expected to be benefited by the death of the deceased man.

Up to this point, however, although everything pointed to collusion and guilt on the part of the prisoners, there was no evidence which could absolutely prove that any murder had been committed. It was clearly the aim of the prosecution to prolong the case as much as possible, for gangs of men were

working night and day among the ruins of "Storm-Cliff Towers" in the hope that something of importance might be discovered, as against the prisoners.

The defence knew this, and as far as possible hastened the proceedings to bring the trial to a close before anything further might be brought to light. At the close of the evidence for the prosecution, however, after all the exhibits had been got in, including the famous cat's-eye ring, the court adjourned until the following day, although Counsel Jones declared that if his Honour would send it straight to the jury he would be willing to close his case without calling any rebutting evidence, and allow the jury to decide the matter upon the evidence already before them.

CHAPTER XXX

NOT PROVEN

Some time before the hour for commencing on the following morning, there was a stir of excitement among the crowds of people waiting for admittance into the court-house.

Dame Rumour said that an important discovery had been made among the ruins of "Storm-Cliff Towers"; that, in fact, some sensational evidence had been unearthed.

On the reopening of the court the place was packed, and the keenest interest was displayed by the excited crowd in the proceedings.

The defence, however, were not greatly concerned at the turn affairs had taken, for Barrister Jones felt confident of his case, and, as he said to his junior, "if the chest has been discovered with its contents uninjured, it is extremely unlikely that a man like Skinner would have left any incriminating evidence there." He was known to have been a most cautious man in regard to letters he wrote, and it was little likely that iron chest would contain much in the shape of evidence. Thus argued Barrister Jones; but when the Crown Prosecutor bustled in with his brief bag, looking especially important, the lawyers for the defence watched him keenly.

The next witness was the detective in charge of the excavation work going on at "The Towers." He deposed that on the previous day at 2.30 in the after-

noon, they had cleared away the debris, and reached that portion of the underground room where the chest or safe was situated. It was very much battered by the force of the explosion, but the contents, which, consisted mostly of papers, were found to be intact.

Among them were a number of important papers belonging to the deceased, some letters from Mrs Dalbert, and the plans and specifications of the fireplace and lift constructed in the northern chamber of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

"Do you wish to put these papers in?" asked the Judge.

"No, your Honour, unless you grant us an adjournment to further examine them," said the Crown Prosecutor.

This his Honour refused to accede to.

"That, then, is our case, your Honour," said the Crown Prosecutor.

Barrister Jones arose at once with dignity, and asked that his clients might be acquitted by the jury without any more waste of time, or their leaving the box. But the foreman of the jury intimated that they were by no means satisfied that the case against the male prisoner had not been proven, and they would prefer to hear his rebutting evidence in regard to the male voice which was heard addressing the female prisoner, as sworn to, both by Miss Ballantyne and Miss Strong. The prisoners, he suggested, might one or both of them wish to make a statement, or even submit to cross-examination in the witness-box. It would very much strengthen the case for the defence if such a course were possible, and the cross-examination proved satisfactory for the defendants.

This, however, was not at all in accordance with the views of Barrister Jones; it was for the other side to prove their case, which they had not done. If either of his clients wished to make a statement he should be pleased for them to do so, but it was not necessary, as they had both of them imparted to him

all that they knew about the matter, which, if it were necessary for him to address the jury in defence, he could make use of.

At this the Judge asked the foreman of the jury whether they wished to hear counsel for the defence. This gentleman replied, "Certainly, if there is anything to be said."

At this Barrister Jones at once arose to commence his defence of the prisoners.

"Your Honour and gentlemen of the jury, I shall call no witnesses, for there is no evidence to controvert. On the face of things, until you have heard my explanation of the matter, I confess that the remarkable incidents of this trial might throw suspicion upon my clients. They were friends and relatives of the deceased, they lived with him as inmates of his house for a considerable time in the closest intimacy, and the circumstances of his death, and the remarkable events which followed, were preserved by them as a secret which they believed it to be the will and wish of their friend and relative that they should not disclose. Our reply to the charges of the prosecution is that Raymond Ballantyne was suffering from a species of madness, that his death was either by accident or suicide, and that the whole arrangement of the secret lift and underground portion of 'The Towers' was as well known to him as it was to his relatives. Meta Dalbert and Owen Skinner are not proved in any way to have had either connection with, or knowledge of, the preservation of the corpse of the deceased."

The argument for the defence was closely continued to its logical sequence, and it soon became evident to all in court that while guilt on the part of the prisoners was strongly suggested, it would, with the evidence to hand, be impossible to secure a conviction.

After the Judge had summed up with great impartiality, the jury were for some hours in anxious deliberation, but the majority held that although suspicion

gathered thickly enough around the case, murder was not proven. The final result was that both prisoners were discharged. It was, however, known to them that the detective department had by no means given up the search for further evidence, and that there was every possibility of their being again brought up on a charge of having been the murderers of Septimus Dorset.

The public were annoyed, as the public usually are when a case of serious crime fails to reach a satisfactory issue in the law-courts. It was, no doubt, a most mysterious affair all through, but, said the intelligent public, it reflected very little credit upon the detective department and the Crown Law Officers that it was not more thoroughly sifted to the bottom.

In the meantime many things were unexplained, and seemingly unexplainable, except by the accused, who judiciously held their peace.

CHAPTER XXXI

AFTERMATH

MUCH which would have interested us concerning prominent persons of this history, has of necessity been crushed out by the rapid movement of the events already chronicled.

A great trial, like a great flood, carries all before it. The whole landscape of one's ordinary life is for the time being submerged. Business may be urgent, pleasure enthralling, or the individual personality great, but the majesty of modern law rides roughshod over everything; business must stand aside, pleasure beckons in vain, and the eminent person gives his evidence by the side of the common man in a place where personal distinction, or anything else, counts little to barristers who are straining every nerve, not to see justice done, but to win a verdict for their own side.

It is an ideal belief that the goddess of justice is blindfolded. Certainly she very often does not see what she well might, but at other times there are rifts in the handkerchief which disclose too much. Let it be said, however, that so far as Australian judges are concerned, they are above suspicion, and administer the law with sound learning, much patience, and undoubted impartiality. It is to be regretted that there is not equal acumen and probity upon the floor of the court and more truthfulness in the witness-box.

During the process of affairs at "The Towers" and the trial, the whole of the interested parties had, metaphorically, been carried off their feet, and no one more so than Beatrice, the mistress of the house of tragedies, who, as the reader knows, had a good deal to conceal in connection with the disappearance of Septimus Dorset.

Alas! for the witness with a secret to be kept back from long-nosed lawyers, who scent mischief from afar. Night visions and day-dreams will not yield much peace of mind until the ordeal is over. Beatrice, however, had passed through the dreaded cross-examination without her secret being even suspected, and her relief was great.

How she hated the very memory of the great house which first took shape in the creative criminal mind of Isaac Shend! How thankful she was that the place had become a mass of blackened ruins! She would never rebuild it; had it not proved a death-trap to her lawyer, and nearly destroyed the brother of her friend! The money loss never occurred to her.

An agent of the insurance company had suggested that she might wish to build another mansion on the old site; but she laughed the suggestion to scorn. "I imagine myself building a house over the secret horrors under 'Storm-Cliff Towers,'" she said.

Yet she brooded over things. Invitations poured in, but she excused herself, and Lucy feared that the spell of the Ballantynes was on her mistress, for Beatrice spent days pouring over musty papers that had been found in the strong-room beneath "The Towers."

Her mind was obsessed by things which had come to her knowledge about the ways and doings of Isaac Shend. It was not possible that he could have been ignorant of those caves when he planned and erected "The Black Mansion," and cemented its floors, and built the North Tower exactly over the subterranean

passage which led to the secret door in the fireplace wall.

"He must have known about it," thought Beatrice, "for it would be before the erection of the house that the shore entrance was closed to the caves."

"But why," exclaimed Beatrice, as she wrestled with the thing that had grown to be the problem of her life, "why was that great house originally built over caves, and why did Isaac Shend on its completion commit suicide? Was there some criminal connection between these things? Was there some awful curse which attached itself to a Ballantyne inhabiting 'The House of Shend'?" Beatrice told something of this to the doctor and Grace, but they laughed at her fears.

She was now living in a mansion in Sydney, for she would not discharge servants who had been faithful to her, nor would she keep them in idleness, nor send them back to England until some of the vexed riddles of her short life in Australia were solved, when she would possibly return with them herself.

Beatrice had kept the gardener as a sort of keeper on "The Towers" grounds, and one afternoon after the trial, ordered the carriage and drove to "Steynbridge Cottage," and asked the doctor and his sister to go with her to see the ruins. Grace could not go, as she expected a friend, so the doctor accompanied Beatrice in the carriage alone.

Not many weeks had passed since the fire, but heavy rains had fallen; the picket walls had been repaired, and within the white fences the kindly grass had beautified much of that which had before been blackened earth, trodden by the passing of multitudes of feet. Even the trees had, here and there, somehow escaped with life, and indications of green buds were showing among the blackened trunks and branches. It was as though the fire had not only destroyed the romance and mystery, and weird, strange beauty of the grounds, but had cleansed it of its criminal

suggestiveness and sombreness. It seemed to relieve Beatrice's mind, and remove a portion of her load.

She had taken the doctor's arm to climb the hill, from which there was the best view of the sea and the blackened ruins. Beatrice was very quiet. They knew each other well enough by this time to remain silent without embarrassment, and yet the doctor's heart beat fast as the fair woman's hand rested lightly upon his arm. He felt somehow so sure that he had but to ask, and that his answer would not be a denial.

"I know well what you are thinking of, Beatrice," he said at last.

"I do not think so," she said, half smiling, as she still looked over toward the ruins.

"You were," he said, "thinking how much happier you would be if you could get away from this sad, mysterious episode of your life, and in another land, across that blue sea yonder, forget these painful recollections and associations. Give me the right, dearest, to take you away, and love and cherish and protect you. Beatrice, be my wife!"

"You have not quite interpreted my thoughts, John," she said, turning around, blushing at his avowal of love, but looking him frankly in the face with something very like tears in her eyes. "I was thinking whatever should I have done if you had lost your life in that awful place."

"But, Beatrice, that is not an answer to my question," said the doctor anxiously.

"John, I am thinking of those trying days of suspense and anxiety and peril, when I learnt your worth. I am sure," she whispered, as though struggling with her feelings, "I think sometimes that, but for you, I must have died. But love! . . . have patience with me, my very dear friend. . . . I esteem you greatly, it may be that I love you; but give me time. I cannot say 'yes,' and I will not and dare not say 'no' to-day. Give me time, John," she repeated, smiling, "and I shall know my heart better. I feel

sure that you love me, and I am proud to have it so. 'Tis said 'that love begets love . . .'"

Tears stood in the girl's eyes, for it was hard to refuse one who had been so true a friend to her; but Beatrice had an ideal conception of love and marriage, and there was something upon her mind. She feared to say "yes" to John Strong, much as she loved him as a brother. The man she married must be more than a brother to her, and she must go to him with a white soul. And then she thought again of Septimus Dorset.

"Beatrice, I will wait, and try to be patient. Grace wants me to take her for a month to New Zealand for rest and change. Yesterday I secured a locum-tenens; will you come with us? A month of forgetfulness will make a new woman of you."

"I will talk about it to Grace," said Beatrice.

But Beatrice did not go to New Zealand, for she was better in health, and the scenes by which she was surrounded were fresher and more novel to her than to Grace and the doctor. She was away, too, from Storm-Cliff; and her household and business and many other things kept her in Sydney.

She had decided, moreover, to employ men to make further excavations below the ruins, and she proposed to do this while the doctor was away, for he had not encouraged her in further prosecuting the search. He did not realise the fascination which the secrets of Isaac Shend possessed for Beatrice. She intended, however, to do all that she proposed to while the doctor and his sister were in New Zealand.

It should be added that there was a secret hope, somewhere in the subconsciousness of her being, that she would yet find out something that would give back to her her former peace of mind.

CHAPTER XXXII

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

THERE was one thing which, for some time, had greatly perplexed Beatrice. Shortly after the funeral of the lawyer and before the trial, the whole of the Dorset family had gone into half-mourning, and on several occasions on which she had met Donald and Betty Dorset, their conversation and conduct had indirectly suggested a doubt as to whether Septimus was really dead.

It seemed impossible to Beatrice that he could be alive, for the corpse was actually taken up from the caves below "The Towers," and no one else had been known to disappear either from "The Towers" or the neighbourhood. But still, the mere suggestion of such a possibility threw a faint light, like that of an Arctic winter, over the whole dark landscape of Beatrice's past experiences. She would have given half her fortune to have known for certain that the lawyer was still alive.

"They must . . . they must . . . know something," she said.

So when an invitation came to Beatrice, after some formal calls, asking her to spend a day at "Dorset Park," she gladly accepted. Thus it came about that on a certain morning Beatrice, with Betty and Donald Dorset, found themselves in conference at "Dorset Park."

"We naturally felt the loss of Septimus very

keenly, but——" Betty stopped there as though embarrassed, and Beatrice felt still more certain that there was something in the atmosphere which breathed, if ever so faintly, of hope.

Betty having, later on, got Beatrice and Donald into the library by themselves, walked over to the door and locked it.

"That'll keep out sundowners and other intruders," she said, laughing. "Now, Miss Ballantyne," she continued, putting on her most bewitching smile, "I wish you'd call me Betty, because Donald and I want you to feel quite at home and have a real private, confidential talk about things. Donald thinks we've found something out about poor Septimus, and we want to consult you; but it's a great secret—we wouldn't have mother know on any account, for we don't know exactly what to believe or what to do."

It was enough for Beatrice to know that something she had earnestly desired to hear about was likely to be disclosed. She would, at any rate, know all that they knew, whatever it was that caused them to lay aside their deep mourning for their brother.

"I will be pleased to call you Betty, Miss Dorset, and your brother Donald," said Beatrice with smiling eagerness, "while the conference lasts, you know, if it will help matters; and I think you had better call me Beatrice, then there will be no formality at all."

"That's first-class," said Betty; "and as I'm the elder of the ladies, and we're in a majority, I'll take the chair and open the proceedings."

At this she drew a large library chair up to the table, and Donald placed seats for Beatrice and himself on either side. It was easy to see that both sister and brother were anxious and excited, and that Betty was trying to hide her feelings by playful extravagances.

"This boy, Beatrice," she commenced, waving her hand to her astonished and smiling brother, "is a

civil engineer, and in the way of his profession has been brought in contact with a man who seems to know a good bit about the movements of Owen Skinner. Donald and I," she said, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, "have talked, and talked, and talked about poor Sep.'s death down in those caves; and it seems certain to us that Skinner must have had confederates besides Mrs Dalbert, and indeed that he has now, and one of them, we think, is the grave-digger at the Storm-Cliff cemetery, whose name is Cordova. He told Donald one day after the funeral that, as likely as not, the body we buried wasn't our brother's at all, and you remember at the trial Barrister Jones, prompted, no doubt, either by Skinner or Mrs Dalbert, said it was quite possible that Septimus might be produced as a witness for the defence before the trial was over. Of course nothing more was said about him, but there may have been reasons; he may be ill somewhere."

"I remember it all, Betty," said Beatrice, with tears in her voice; "go on, please."

"Well, the last thing we heard is that although Owen Skinner has gone back to cultivate flowers at Storm-Cliff, Mrs Dalbert has mysteriously disappeared, and neither the detectives, nor her servants nor late companion, nor anyone else, have any knowledge as to her whereabouts. But three days ago we received a strange, anonymous letter in a handwriting which is an imitation of Sep.'s. It is no doubt a forgery, for Septimus, even if alive, would never have written it; but, on the other hand, who could have thought of sending such a letter, unless someone, as Donald says, personally interested in these strange affairs. It must be someone who knows something about our brother."

Donald handed an envelope across to Beatrice containing a sheet of notepaper. It had the appearance of a dainty *billet-doux*, and bore the Sydney postmark. It was undated, and read as follows:

"Be prepared to receive your brother Septimus, who will return shortly, accompanied by his wife."

The three looked at each other in silence.

"I do . . . hope . . . that it's true," stammered Beatrice.

"The whole thing, Miss Ballantyne, is a cruel hoax," said Donald hotly; "and accompanied by his wife, too! It's too absurd!"

"I must call you to order, Donald," said the prosaic Betty; "we have agreed in this private conference to call each other by our Christian names."

"I beg pardon," said Donald brusquely.

"What an extraordinary letter," exclaimed Beatrice, paying no heed to Betty. "It reads like a burlesque. Why should he—coming back to life again—bring with him a wife? See! it's written on lady's ivory notepaper, and perfumed. Surely it's not possible that he can have left my house as he did for the purpose of an elopement with anyone?"

"No," said Donald, who was always loyal to his family—and Septimus. "He was abducted from Storm-Cliff in his sleep, that's certain. He never left your house, Miss Ballantyne—I beg your pardon, Beatrice—of his own volition. But somehow—I can't explain—I'm quite hopeful that he isn't dead! That Cordova knows something, and I'll have it out of him or wring his neck."

"Donald, you certainly should make this man tell you more, as he has told you so much; why not show him the letter?" said Betty.

"Yes, I might do that; but may I ask," he said, looking across at Beatrice, "have your men made any further discoveries at 'The Towers'?"

"Nothing," said Beatrice.

"Beatrice!" exclaimed Betty, rising from the chair in her eagerness, "Donald has a fortnight's holiday; why not let him go to 'The Towers' and overlook your work-people, and keep an eye on the doings of

Skinner and Cordova and others. He might find out something."

"With all my heart," replied Beatrice, looking at Donald. "I should not have dared to have asked you on account of your brother; but will you go?"

"My brother's disappearance is one reason why I say 'yes' at once, Miss Beatrice," said Donald; "but how many men have you there?"

"Four and the gardener."

"Write me a letter of authority, and I'll be there to-morrow, and if there is anything to find out, for all our sakes I'll try and find it."

There were several seconds of silence after this, and then Beatrice said, addressing Betty:

"Do you think it possible for a secret to be hid for nearly half a century, with people, as it were, passing over the top of it every day?"

"I think that anything is possible that's stupid and ignorant, so far as most people are concerned," replied Betty.

"Those detectives are not much good!" exclaimed Donald. "They seem to have relegated the whole affair to a top shelf with other criminal back numbers."

"The criminals ought to be found out and punished," said Beatrice. "I don't want to make a detective of you, Donald, but I would give anything almost to know the fate of your brother; and"—she paused for a moment—"and to have the solution of another secret which lies below those ruins—the secret of my ancestors, and the secret of Isaac Shend."

There was another silence, when Beatrice with tears in her eyes exclaimed, "How I wish I were a man!"

It was the last straw for Betty, who had been wrought to a high state of feeling by the conversation.

"Oh, Donald, my brother!" she cried, suddenly putting her arms around his neck, "can't you find out for us? I feel sometimes as though my heart would break with this awful uncertainty. You remember what he said . . . once, about the curse of

'The Black Mansion,' and you remember how that affair was hushed up with Meta Dalbert . . . yes, I will speak of it! . . . Beatrice is one of us . . . Sep. told me afterward the woman was a witch or she-devil with the face of an angel. But whatever she was, you remember how she absolutely fascinated him, and made him at the time madly in love with her.

"Supposing that she has spirited him away somewhere, and means to come back his wife. Think of it, after that trial and all the rest. 'Twould kill the mater . . . the disgrace! . . . 'Twould almost be better for him to be dead!"

"The thing's impossible, Betty!" ejaculated Donald; "put it right out of your mind. Septimus would never disgrace the family."

"But if he's alive where can he be?" wailed Betty, thoroughly broken down.

"He's not alive! Cordova's a liar!" said Donald excitedly. "But if he is, be sure of this, Miss Ballantyne, he'd never come back to Sydney with Meta Dalbert for his wife. He could never do it after all that has transpired."

"But suppose that he comes back and does not know!" said Beatrice.

"In that case," said Donald, "I fancy when he found out he'd shoot himself."

"Not he," moaned Betty, drying her eyes and unconsciously dropping from the sublime to the ridiculous; "a lawyer was never yet known to commit suicide."

Betty opened her heart to Beatrice after Donald had gone, and somehow Beatrice was drawn to Betty, and she told her a good deal of what she had found out and surmised about the affairs of Isaac Shend.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE PADLOCKED BOOK

THE following morning there emerged from the iron gates of "Dorset Park" a fashionably attired horseman, riding a thoroughbred in the pink of condition. It was Donald upon his famous racer, "Tomboy." He was on his way to Woollahra to call for Beatrice to ride with him to Storm-Cliff.

"We'd better show ourselves openly," he said; "they'll be less suspicious." So after a smart canter, on nearing Storm-Cliff, they rode their horses slowly, walking them through the village and around by Skinner's cottage, and on from there to the party of labourers excavating at the ruins.

The men were informed by Miss Ballantyne that Mr Dorset would, for the next few days, occasionally overlook the work, and that unless some important discovery was made, operations would not be continued longer than another week. No secret was made about this, and both Beatrice and Donald knew that what was said would be all over Storm-Cliff before night.

Donald rode back with Beatrice to her Woollahra Mansion, and was asked to stay for lunch. Beatrice was going to a ball that night at Government House, and Lady Stirling, who had arrived during their absence, was her chaperon.

Donald had met Lady Stirling before. She was

sorry for him, for she had heard a good deal about the "Storm-Cliff Towers" tragedy.

"No further news, I suppose, Mr Dorset?"

"Nothing, Lady Stirling."

"I think it's just as well. Miss Ballantyne is worrying herself more than enough over the miserable old place. If it were mine, I should not want to know anything more about it. The sooner we forget the unpleasant episodes of our lives, the better it is for us."

"But don't you think it is our duty to expose and, if possible, punish wrongdoers?" said Donald.

"Not when the wrongdoing is as ancient as this is. Of course I am referring to Miss Ballantyne's interest in the matter; if I were in your place I've no doubt I should try hard to find out who killed my brother, and, if possible, have him brought to justice —although, after all, it would only harrow up your feelings again, and the punishment of the wrongdoer would not bring much compensation to you. I hate law and lawyers. See how Miss Ballantyne is worrying herself; and, as I tell her, she's getting horridly uncommunicative. I believe she's discovered something fresh, for she certainly has had more upon her mind lately. Try and get her to tell you."

Just then Beatrice herself entered in a princess robe which wonderfully became her.

"You look just lovely after your ride," said Lady Stirling. "How did 'Crusoe' behave himself?"

"Splendidly; he's a lovely hack. But I'm sure that Mr Dorset is as hungry as a hunter, and so am I."

During luncheon Lady Stirling watched Donald very narrowly. She liked the young man, and her verdict was not unfavourable; but she had other plans for Beatrice, and was hoping to take her back with them to England.

"A girl like Beatrice ought not to marry a

colonial," she thought, "although the young fellows are mostly good-looking, well-educated, and gentlemanly; but they haven't the modest reserve of an English University man."

Donald was rattling away to both ladies about yachting, cricket, and a famous Australian contralto; but Beatrice read him better than Lady Stirling, and knew that his deeper thoughts were with more serious things.

"Connie, I want to show Mr Dorset a book that I have in the library," said Beatrice after lunch.

"Well, dear, I'm going. I must give a little of my time to Godfrey before dinner, and I have to persuade him to come with us to the ball."

After Lady Stirling's departure, Beatrice invited Donald into the library.

"I want your opinion, Mr Dorset, about an old account-book that was found some time ago among the ruins. It has padlock clasps, and I have only recently had a key made to unlock it."

She took from a drawer an old leather-bound volume, fastened with curious padlocked clasps.

The first portion of it was ruled with money and date columns, like an ordinary ledger; but between these, where entries are usually made, were pasted newspaper cuttings, the records of robberies and other crimes committed many years before by convicts and others, and opposite each were placed amounts which seemed to be the cash results of the crimes referred to. In the ledger folio column were numbers ranging from three to twenty.

There were scores of pages of these entries, extending back for many years.

In another part of the book were rough plans (evidently made by skilled hands) of the premises of banks and other financial institutions of the city; also of the old Government House, and some of the larger private mansions of wealthy citizens. Many of them were, however, obsolete.

On a page near the end of the book was a ground plan of "Storm-Cliff Towers" as first erected, and opposite a sketch which represented the caves and passages beneath the mansion; but, as Beatrice pointed out, they appeared to be more extensive toward the west than anything they had discovered.

"I wanted you to see that," said Beatrice; "both plans are signed I. S., and do you notice there is a passage marked on the plan from these caves into the gully."

"The whole of them are connected by passages, and these lines across must represent doors," said Donald, who was greatly interested and excited.

"There's a map of the coast on the other side," said Beatrice.

Donald turned over, and found on the other side a large scale map, in several sections, of the south-eastern coast-line as far as the southern extremity of Botany Bay; there were figures attached which seemed to indicate furlongs and miles, and a cross on La Perouse Island.

"I cannot make head nor tail of it," whispered Beatrice, "but it has to do, no doubt, with 'The Towers.' What do you make of it?"

But Donald hardly knew as yet what to make of it.

"It's very extraordinary," he said, "very extraordinary! You see there are here the records of crimes reaching back for years, even before the date when 'The Towers' was built, and the proceeds in the money columns represent very large sums. See," he said, turning back the leaves, "quite a number are entered in writing as though they were the records of unpublished transactions. Look at this one, for instance. It is a business-like account of what was evidently a most audacious fraud, and one probably which was never discovered."

Donald read as follows:

"To Scrivener's a/c. Altering the sentences of 150 prisoners to lesser terms of imprisonment @ £10 each ...	£1500
Do. Do. 50 prisoners @ £12 each ...	600
	£2100

"The clerks in this case were evidently convicts, or emancipists, who had access to the records of the names and periods of the transportation of prisoners, and fraudulently altered them, for a consideration, to shorter terms."

"But would prisoners have all that money?" said Beatrice.

"They were no doubt mostly what were called assigned servants," replied Donald, "and they got hold of a good bit of money, honestly or otherwise."

Donald ran his finger down several items of smaller amounts, and stopped at one of £5000.

"That was a big haul," he said.

"To cash abstracted from the Government Treasury, Hobart Town. Net proceeds	£5000 0 0

"But look here," he said excitedly. "Here is a newspaper cutting of an extraordinary robbery at the Bank of Australia in George Street, Sydney. From a house across the street they actually tunnelled into the bank vaults, and here you have a business-like statement of the proceeds.

"To cash proceeds from robbery of bank—British silver	£750 0 0
Spanish and other dollars ...	2030 0 0
Bank Notes	14500 0 0
	£17280 0 0

There was a pause after this, and then Beatrice said:

"I noticed near the end of the book a plan of the bank and street and vaults, with the tunnel and house opposite, all set out to scale in feet and inches."

"There must have been a gang of about twenty of them. Those figures in the folio column seem to indicate the number participating in the division of the spoils."

"But tell me, Mr Dorset, what do you make of it?"

Donald shook his head and continued to turn over pages of records of robberies, blackmailing contributions of wealthy emancipists and others, and Beatrice watched him with breathless interest.

"Well?"

He had closed the book and stood looking at her. He had seen something which he did not want her to know. It was an account of some moneys paid away in connection with the erection of "Storm-Cliff Towers."

"I hardly know, Miss Ballantyne," he stammered out, "what to say to you. I don't wish to alarm you, but I would close the book and lock it away somewhere. It seems to me as though you have unearthed the records of some secret society, formed many years ago among the convicts and dishonest emancipists for the purpose of systematic robbery and blackmailing of prisoners and officials, and its headquarters have in some mysterious way been in the caves under 'Storm-Cliff Towers.' According to that plan, there are at least two large caves or underground apartments still undiscovered, and it is my belief that Skinner and his fellow conspirators have access to them from the gully outside 'The Towers' grounds. If that is so it explains a good deal of what has happened."

"Hadn't we better give information to the police?" said Beatrice.

"I think not, at any rate for the present. I have

promised Betty, you know, to try and find out something about our brother myself. The police had the matter in hand for months unsuccessfully. Besides, we do not yet know the strength of this secret gang, which I feel sure still exists; nor do we know what might result to you or to me if we came further into collision with them. We must proceed now with the greatest caution."

"It's plain enough now where they got the money from to defend the case," said Beatrice.

"I shall want a week to carry out a plan I have formed," said Donald, "and I will start on it to-night. It's rather a pity the doctor is away; he is about the only one in Storm-Cliff I should dare to trust."

"Perhaps it is better as it is," said Beatrice; "you are clever, and I think that it is better to keep what we know entirely to ourselves, that is, to you and I and Betty. Dr Strong wants me to sell the land at Storm-Cliff and leave Australia; but something is impelling me to go on and find out the secret of this awful place, and of your brother's disappearance, and my father's brother's connection with these things. I feel that it's my duty to myself and others."

She looked Donald squarely in the face as she said this, and he respected her for her courage.

She already guessed what Donald thought he knew.

"Why does Dr Strong want you to leave Australia?" asked Donald, wishing to turn the conversation away from what he felt to be dangerous ground.

"He wants me to go with him and Grace for a trip to Europe."

"Not as Miss Ballantyne, but as Mrs Strong?" queried Donald, with a half-smile which did not, however, deceive Beatrice.

She blushed and laughed.

"He's a great friend of mine, Mr Dorset, and you know I'm awfully indebted to him; but I've not agreed yet to go to England with anyone."

"But he's asked you?" persisted Donald.

"Of course he has; but I have not said 'yes' to him."

"But, pardon me, Miss Ballantyne. Have you said 'no'?"

"Not exactly; you see I'm too busy over these things to give any serious attention to such matters."

"That's nonsense, Miss Ballantyne," said Donald, shaking his head; "such things have a curious way of settling themselves, sometimes before we know it, no matter how important the affairs may be that we have in hand. There are others who love you besides Dr Strong."

"Don't say another word, Donald. I know that you are my very good friend," said Beatrice, reaching out her hand to say good-bye, and allowing it to remain longer than usual in his warm, firm clasp; "but I'm too worried and perplexed to fall in love with anyone. I want my friends to be content to be my friends. . . . You see, Donald," she continued with tears in her eyes, "I love you all, and Betty and Grace too, for you've been very good to me; but I don't want to talk about such a sacred thing as love while these affairs remain unsettled."

"Good-bye, Miss Ballantyne," said Donald, smiling; "when you are at the ball to-night, remember I shall be upon the warpath."

"I won't forget," replied Beatrice gravely; "and may God take care of you and help you to find Septimus."

"Amen," said Donald reverently, as he lifted his hat and jumped into the saddle.

"He's a good fellow, is Donald," said Beatrice to herself, "and I like him the better that he doesn't make love to me, like other men."

Beatrice felt very thankful, after Donald's departure, that Woollahra was some miles away from Storm-Cliff. To think of that great house being built over the headquarters of a den of convict thieves.

Of course they would have access to the house, and intended to get her out of it from the first. But there was one thought that came back again and again to her. She thought of her uncle, and asked herself whether he had anything to do with this gang of criminals. "He must have known," she thought, "and have been in league with them too; if so, what a disgrace to me."

That night Beatrice went with Sir Godfrey and Lady Stirling to the Government House Ball. It was a somewhat exclusive function; but the men thronged Lady Stirling for introductions to Beatrice.

"You look splendid, dear," whispered Lady Stirling to her as Sir George Cameron led her back after a delightful waltz. "Who is it to be, among your scores of admirers?"

Beatrice smiled and shook her head. "I don't know any of them well enough yet, dear; I must have lots of time."

She was enjoying herself splendidly, and replied to the witty compliments of her partners with zest and polished repartee. Occasionally she sat out a dance with some adoring swain in the cool conservatories. She was taken in to supper by a lord, who might one day be an earl. But amid all the gaiety of that brilliant night the thought of Donald Dorset was never wholly absent.

She knew that he was doing what few of those society dandies would have dared to do for her. Disguised as a swagman, he was risking his life down at Storm-Cliff to discover, if possible, the fate of his brother, and to solve for Beatrice the dread secret of the Caves of Shend.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BEATRICE IS PERPLEXED

Lady Constance Stirling discovered later in the night that, with all her gaiety, Beatrice had something upon her mind.

"Send Sir Godfrey home and come out and stay with me to-night, Connie," pleaded Beatrice. "I'm dead tired; but until I have a real good talk by the fire I'm sure I shan't be able to go to sleep."

Lady Stirling looked at her with a smile. She wanted badly to see her happily married to the right man; but, as she told her husband, Beatrice Ballantyne would be a hard girl for a man to please.

"If I come, do you think you'll be able to tell me something I'd like to know?"

They were alone in a corner of the ladies' cloakroom, so Beatrice kissed her and said: "Do come, Connie; I'm horribly worried and perplexed, but I can't promise to tell you."

"Oh, I'll come then, and you'll have to tell me; but I must see Sir Godfrey and tell him, for he's been fidgeting to get away the last half-hour. I'll tell him you are ill and that I must go home with you. I can explain to-morrow that you had a pain in your heart."

An hour afterward the two ladies, in slippers and dressing-gowns, were ensconced in comfortable chairs in front of a cosy fire in Beatrice's luxurious boudoir.

Steaming black coffee in dainty cups stood upon a

small table within easy reach, and Lucy, nothing loath, had been sent to bed.

Lady Stirling had met Beatrice in southern Italy, and afterward travelled with her upon the steamer, where they became intimate, to Sydney. She and Sir Godfrey had been doing New Zealand and some of the more famous Pacific Islands, and were now resident for a while in Sydney. They knew everybody and went everywhere, for Sir Godfrey Stirling was a famous diplomat as well as a man of wealth, and Connie, as he called his wife, and Beatrice had become like sisters. "The Towers" was burnt down, and the trial over, and half forgotten by most people, when the Stirlings returned to Australia.

"It's just lovely to sit here and talk," commenced Lady Stirling; "I don't feel a bit tired now. What a guy that Lord Tatenham is; whatever did he talk about when he took you in to supper?"

"He wanted to know if I wouldn't like to be back in England again."

"What did you say to him?"

"Yes, if I could go by rail."

"And what did he reply to that?"

"He said: 'Bai Jove! I think then, Miss Ballantyne, you'll have to continue to illuminate this Southern Hemisphere with your wit and beauty.'"

"It's a wonder that he did not offer to take you to the Northern Hemisphere as his wife. The Tatenhams are as poor as Job, and he is only kept on the governor's staff in the hope of his picking up a rich Australian wife. I would be sorry for her, however. They say that Mrs O'Dyke quite lately paid his tailor's bill for several hundreds; but with all his smart clothes he's a poor representative of the British aristocracy. Some of these old families, like mint, have a tendency to run to seed."

"Well, you need not discuss him, Connie, although he's a beautiful dancer, and is quite entertaining when

he talks about something he understands; but you know he's not my fancy."

"You like something more solid, and useful, and reliable, and a bit elderly, don't you, Beatrice?" said Lady Stirling. "Something after the style of my old man. They're all right enough, but I'll warn you, my dear girl, you might not fall in love with them if you first saw them with their nightcaps on! When is Dr Strong to be back from New Zealand?"

"What utter nonsense you talk, Connie. If my husband wished to wear a nightcap, I'd see that it was a pretty one. Besides, there is nothing at all between me and Dr Strong, and he isn't elderly."

"My dear, I don't want to ruff your feathers up, but are you quite sure there's nothing between you? Haven't you flirted with him a tiny bit now? See how good he has been to you, and how much you have been together, and what a friend you are of his sister's. You know, Beatrice, lots of girls drift into marriages with unsuitable partners, without realising that they are drifting, until they find themselves hopelessly stranded on a rocky shore and the knot tied. Dr Strong is, no doubt, a very worthy and lovable man, but he's too old for a girl like you."

"You're taking a great deal too much for granted, Connie," said Beatrice, looking steadfastly into the fire.

"I don't know that I am, little girl; you've got something on your mind that you haven't told me, or anyone else either. Come now, answer me yes or no. Did you ever call him John?"

"How horrid you are! Supposing that I did, what of that? See how much we've been thrown together."

"Ah, Beatrice! the ship's been drifting, I can see, drifting toward the shore of unsuitable matrimony. Didn't he want you to go with Grace to New Zealand?"

"Yes, certainly he did! He thought a complete change would benefit my health."

"Of course! Now tell me, love, he's asked you, hasn't he? Ah, no answer! It's evidently time that someone manned the lifeboat, or goodness knows! Ordered out a tug to haul you back into deep water. I say! where was Donald Dorset to-night?"

The question was so unexpected that it dropped like a bombshell into Beatrice's beleaguered mind. She suddenly thought: "Where indeed was Donald, and what might be happening to him even then?"

"Connie, if you'll be good, and not tell Sir Godfrey, I'll tell you everything; because you'll advise me," said Beatrice in a shaky voice.

Lady Stirling reached over and took Beatrice's hand and kissed it. "Go on," she said, "I've kissed the book."

Beatrice looked into the fire for some time without speaking; but her friend waited patiently. "Dr Strong has been wonderfully good in a hundred ways," she said at last, "and I love him very much, but I think only as a brother; he wants me, of course, like a dozen other men, and I feel that I owe more to him than perhaps anyone else. He might have been killed down there. And then, Connie, you can't think what a dear girl Grace is!"

"But you don't want to marry her," interrupted Lady Stirling.

"Of course not; but it's very nice to have a sister-in-law one loves."

"And you think, Goosie, that you ought to marry him because you love his sister? What rubbish! I don't care how good she is she'll be jealous when once you've got him, and probably get married herself, and you'll be left tied up to a staid, elderly man you respect and love as a brother only. Getting married on the strength of mutual esteem, and all that sort of thing, is like making tea before the kettle boils —it's wishy-washy stuff no matter how much sugar

you put into it. It's bad enough for girls who must marry money, but if I were you, with your fortune, I'd see that the kettle was boiling over before I made the tea. How about Donald Dorset?"

"I feel different to him, Connie; but I don't think I respect him as much as I do Dr Strong."

"Probably not; but you may love him a great deal for all that. No woman respects her husband as she does her father. 'Tisn't natural!"

The two ladies were very quiet for a minute after this, and then Beatrice said: "I don't know what I shall say to him when he returns from New Zealand. He has been such a good brother to Grace, and he has been a brother, and father, and lover, and everything else to me; but there's something that I shall have to tell him that may change him altogether. Donald Dorset knows it, I'm sure, and it does not seem to have made any difference to him; but Dr Strong prides himself upon the unsullied reputation of his ancestors."

Beatrice paused and gazed into the fire.

"Well, go on, dear," said Lady Stirling, picking up Beatrice's hand and holding it in both of hers, "it won't make a bit of difference to me whatever it is. I suppose you think you've found out something more about one of your uncles?"

"You must not whisper it to anyone, Connie, but I believe I've found out through an old book that my Uncle Hugh, who built 'The Towers,' was once an emancipist, so he must at one time have been a convict; and that is not the worst of it: he seems to have been in league with a band of criminals who were engaged in wholesale robberies at the very time he built 'The Towers.'"

"What an extraordinary story!" said Lady Stirling. "I don't believe it for a moment, and I am sure that you will find out that it is not true. However, if it was, what does that matter to you? Don't you know that the forbears of the oldest families of

England were buccaneers, and brigands, and that sort of thing? Look how they used to steal from each other, and pillage the Lowlands in the days of the Scottish Chiefs. I think folks in Australia are a bit too sensitive about the characters of their ancestors. So long as one's uncle or grandfather wasn't hung for murder I don't see that it matters much."

But Beatrice shook her head.

CHAPTER XXXV

WAYSIDE SEED

When Donald, disguised as a swagman, with bluey on shoulder and billy in hand, on the night of the ball, made his way to Storm-Cliff, he was a man with a purpose, and a determined man too; for he had undertaken to solve a problem at the risk of his life.

His objective was a wild, rocky declivity on the shore-line, north of Storm-Cliff, overgrown with scrub and stunted trees, with here and there a tall fir or pine. Running through it to the small cove, which looked as if it had been blasted out of the rocky coast-line, was a stream of clear, fresh water. Thus on three sides of the gully there was a sharp rise, and on the fourth a tiny bay with pebbly beach. It was not an uncommon thing for a sundowner or other humble traveller to Sydney from the south, humping swag and billy, to camp in this sheltered nook for the night.

Donald chose a level bit of ground north of the rivulet for a camp, and throwing down his swag at the foot of a sheltering tree, started to gather wood to make a fire. Following the course of the rivulet, he soon collected a small armful of sticks. Night was closing in, and gathering clouds and the moan of the sea told of impending rain or storm; but he followed on up-stream until he reached a clump of dense bushes, a few yards above a mimic waterfall.

The bushes interlaced from both sides of the stream, and above was a sand-dune, heaped high by the force of the wind during heavy gales.

Here he discovered what appeared to be the source or outlet of the stream. No one was in sight, and as the gloom deepened, Donald stepped upon some outjutting rocks to get clear of the bushes and behind them. Here he found an ancient subway, constructed of heavy timber, evidently built at some time to protect a water channel and preserve egress for storm waters during heavy rain.

Bending slightly down, he stepped into the subway, and lighting a dark lantern, flashed its rays into the tunnel. The water was flowing, three or four inches deep, over a level floor of limestone, and to penetrate the tunnel he found it would be necessary to walk through the water. He noticed, too, by the gleam of his lantern, that a short distance from the entrance the subway, which was six feet in height, was cut in the solid limestone, and he guessed that somewhere along there would be found a doorway and passage leading into the limestone caves below "The Towers." He thought it unwise, however, just then to follow up his discovery, so closing the dark shade of his lantern, he made his way out again, and, picking up the bundle of firewood, hastened back to the place he had chosen for a camp. Here he soon had a fire burning, and his billy hanging over it supported by forked sticks.

"'Spose, Mr Swaggie, yo's going ter camp here?" said a thin voice from the shadow of the tree.

Donald turned around with a start, for the roar of the sea had drowned any slight noise which the naked feet of the new-comer might have made as he approached.

A queer creature, unkempt and ragged, squatted down by the fire, and said, "Yer won't miss a bit of tucker, Boss. I'll camp with yer till morning."

"Who are you?" asked Donald, eyeing him with much disfavour. "I'll give you something to eat, but prefer to camp alone."

"But yer won't mind poor Tonk Daley stopping with yer, Boss? I'm only a kid, and if Owen Skinner catches me in the gully he's going to do for me, and chuck me over the cliffs."

Donald looked at this strange specimen of humanity that, curled up like a dog, looked into the glowing embers of the fire and whined out again: "Chuck Tonk over the cliffs."

Donald's interest was aroused at the mention of Skinner's name, so he said: "Skinner's at 'Ferndale'; that's a long way from here."

"No fear, Boss. He'll be here to-night, and 'Dova and Blackie, and maybe more; but if we put the fire out they won't see us. I don't want to be chucked over the cliff, Boss."

A whole crowd of conjectures thronged Donald's mind. The man was evidently a half-witted creature, whose short, frayed trousers and ragged jacket and cap spoke of friendless beggary, and he knew something of Skinner and Cordova and others, and connected them with the gully.

"Here, have something to eat, and presently I'll give you a drink of tea out of the lid of the billy," said Donald.

The man ate the buttered bread sandwiches ravenously, as might a starving dog, and reached out his hand for more.

"I say, mister," he said, "you're a toff. But I won't come it on you. Gi's a bit more. Tonk's had nothing to eat all day."

Donald was taken aback by the simple way in which this half-witted creature had penetrated his disguise. The savoury sandwiches, square and with crusts cut off, had been prepared by Betty, and, as Tonk very well knew, were not the customary food of a tramp.

"Shut up!" replied Donald, attempting to suit his conversation to his attire; "got 'em given me by a friend."

"Sister, maybe," said Tonk, munching away with his mouth full.

However, his penetration robbed him of certain sweets, for Donald, not to excite his imagination further, ate the jam sandwiches himself.

Having drank some tea, Donald lit his pipe, and pulling a blanket over him, for the fire was going out, listened to the various sounds which, above the roar of the sea, could be heard in the gully.

Tonk broke the silence with a rather startling question.

"Why didn't yer sleep at home, Boss?"

"Tonk Daley," said Donald, carrying out an idea that had come to him, "I'm a detective, sent down here to watch. Now tell me all you know about Owen Skinner and the others. If you tell me lies I'll put you in jail; but tell me right and I'll give you five shillings."

"Ah!" said Tonk, "you're a blooming copper are yer? I thought yer was some make up. Give us a chew of yer 'bacca."

Donald handed him the tobacco, which he took and chewed in silence, and then remarked: "Yer a blooming copper, are yer? Then I shan't tell yer a thing. I reckon 'Dova ed put me down the blow-hole, or some other blooming thing, if I did."

"You know, then, about the blow-hole?" said Donald.

"'Course I do," said Tonk; "any dashed fool does. Didn't yer read about it in the papers?"

Donald began to realise that the half-witted are often more sly and crafty than would be expected, so he tried a less direct method.

"Where do you live, Tonk?"

"Mostly in Granny Grimm's shed," replied Tonk indifferently.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Nothing, 'cept fishing and catching crabs, and carrying bits o' things for Granny to La Perouse."

"Don't you get tired walking so far without boots?"

"No," said Tonk; "takes two hours, and they thrash me if I goes to sleep."

"What makes you go to sleep?"

"When it's warm I lies down in the sun."

Just then the cry of a curlew was heard higher up the gully. Tonk suddenly drew nearer to Donald, and in a frightened whisper said: "That's them, Boss; lie close. I don't want to be chucked over the cliffs."

They waited in silence for a quarter of an hour, and then a light was seen moving near the subway. It moved like a lantern held in someone's hand.

Donald immediately hurried noiselessly after it, closely followed by Tonk Daley. There seemed to be three or four of them, and they were making in the direction of the entrance to the subway.

Suddenly the men stopped, and stood still as though listening.

Donald and Tonk immediately sheltered behind a bush. When Donald looked up again the light was out and the men had disappeared.

"Where have they gone to?" whispered Donald.

But there was no answer, and looking and feeling close around, Donald saw that Tonk Daley had disappeared. He regretted now that he had told him he was a detective; yet he felt somehow that Tonk Daley was not in the secret which he had set himself to unravel.

By this time the rain, which had before threatened, had set in with light showers, and Donald followed the fall of the stream back to his camp, and got together his swag and blankets, and put them under the shelter of some thick bushes. He concluded that the men he had seen enter the subway would be some time

before they returned, and he had determined to explore the subway and, if he found a door, go farther up the water channel and wait in the darkness to see who came out—for they would be sure to carry a light—or act as circumstances might dictate.

It was with a nervous sense of apprehension that he pushed aside the bushes and entered the opening of the subway. He hesitated for a moment, as, holding his revolver with one hand, he withdrew the screen from the bull's-eye lantern which he carried fastened to his belt. He could shield it with his coat in a moment; but standing there in the channel with the water running over his thick boots, he did not know but what the uncovering of the light would be the signal for his death.

He stood for a full minute with the light glancing up the subway, waiting for something to happen, and shivering at his own reckless daring; but save for the noise of the running water, nothing was to be heard.

Setting his teeth together he now turned his light upon the southern wall of the subway and walked swiftly through the water. If there was a door leading to "The Towers" caves, it must be in the south wall. He counted his steps and calculated that he had gone about one hundred and fifty yards when the subway suddenly increased in size and another smaller water channel appeared on the right. It was down this that the water was flowing, while that to the left was higher and perfectly dry. Donald now felt the need of a few minutes for thought; he realised that he would be perfectly safe in the subway to the right, for there could be no entrance from that side to "The Towers'" caves, and no likelihood of any member of the gang going into it.

So he turned into the smaller subway, and, standing in the middle of the stream, found that he could just stand erect. He wore thick waterproof boots, and stood there listening, feeling safer and more

at his ease than he had done since entering the tunnel.

The atmosphere was quite fresh, and for a quarter of an hour he stood there with his lamp covered, in complete darkness, when suddenly he felt himself touched by a hand.

Only by the greatest effort did he smother an exclamation, as, swinging round, he threw back his coat, uncovering the light of the lantern, and levelled his revolver at a small figure which cringed in front of him.

"Don't shoot, Mr Policeman," whispered a thin voice which he immediately detected.

It was Tonk Daley, as white as a ghost, and trembling with fright.

"When did you come here?" asked Donald in a low tone of voice; but he immediately corrected himself for he knew *when* he must have come, and said, "What are you after here. Don't you know you may be killed. I believe you're one of the gang," and he put the revolver in the man's face as though to shoot him.

Without a word the terrified man clutched his arm and pointed down the subway. There was a light approaching from the entrance, but some distance off.

Donald now felt that his only safety lay in immediate action. Tonk was no doubt in league with his enemies and would expose him to them when they drew nearer unless he somehow silenced him. He was a desperate man now, defending his life, and fear makes most men cruel. Tonk stood close beside him in the water; at any moment he might cry out and discover him, but with his strong hands he could throttle him without a sound before the intruders got much nearer.

He would ask Tonk one question before choking him into silence, and he turned around, when, in a plaintive, whining undertone the man said:

"Don't make a noise, Boss; let's get farther back.

They never come up here. If Owen Skinner finds me he'll chuck me over the rocks."

Donald decided immediately to take the risk and trust Tonk Daley.

"Go farther in, and don't make a sound. I'll see that no one hurts you."

He heard Tonk splashing through the water higher up; but turning the shade of his lamp to cover every gleam of light, he crept nearer to the junction of the channels, and watched the approaching lights, for he now saw that there were two lanterns.

He crouched close to the south wall of the subway as the two drew nearer, splashing through the water.

Nearer and nearer they came—one was a woman—and at the junction of the subways they stopped.

It was Meta Dalbert and Owen Skinner!

Donald was not more than twenty feet away from them when Skinner stopped, and turning around, faced Mrs Dalbert and said, "Before we go in to them, let's thoroughly understand each other."

"Well, I thought we understood each other already."

Donald detected that in the woman's voice which told of fear, and yet obstinate determination.

Skinner looked at his watch and said: "It's ten minutes still, before time. Stand out of the water and let me put things plain, Meta; it's evident that you don't understand or realise that we may neither of us come out of this place alive. The gang know everything now."

"My dear man, you're the captain, and as much implicated as I am. Don't go and make a fool of yourself now!"

"I don't want to make a fool of myself, and I don't intend to let you make a fool of me, Meta."

"Look here, Owen; I'm not going away in that schooner, and I'd sooner die than marry you. All I've come here for to-night is to get my share of that £5000, and if you play false to me at the meeting I'll

expose you to the gang, and, if necessary, shoot you as you sit in the chair."

"You would, would you?"

"Yes, you wretch, you're nothing but a coward. Do you know I'm already legally married to Septimus Dorset, and I'm going back with him to 'Dorset Park,' and I'll compel them to treat me properly; and I'll go into society yet as his wife, but not in Australia. I'm going to have that £2500!"

"Where did you marry him?" asked Skinner, half choking with anger.

"Over at La Perouse, sir. He's there now in the cottage waiting for me. Oh, it was all right: clergyman, marriage certificate, witnesses; everything legal and in proper form."

Donald forgot Tonk Daley, and almost everything else, as he choked back an exclamation of astonishment and anger. "The she-devil!" he muttered below his breath.

"Well, the time's up," said Skinner with an oath. "You're a daring adventuress; but I warn you to be more careful with your tongue inside than you are with me, or you'll never come out alive."

"P—h, you coward! Who is there to be afraid of: Morgan and Milligan, Cordova and Blackie, and Grimes and Williams; why, they'd every one of them go on their knees to me, and if they didn't I'd shoot or poison the whole crowd of them."

"Ah, they don't know yet that you're a traitor."

"Go on," said the woman sternly, "and let us get it over. You've tried to frighten me in these caves before."

For a quarter of an hour Donald and Tonk Daley stood in the pitchy darkness, listening with tense attention, but no sound reached them save that of the flowing stream, and then Dorset caught Tonk by the hand and whispered, "Let's get out of this."

Through the night they made their way down to the camp again. There Donald gave Tonk some

silver, and cautioning him not to tell a soul on peril of his life, he sent him off through the darkness.

Hour after hour, revolver in hand, Donald watched from a hiding-place, where he could distinctly observe the entrance to the subway. It was the longest night he ever knew. Drizzling rain fell, but there was no movement of man or beast in the dark gully.

About four in the morning, to his astonishment, he heard the sound of voices in the cove, and a boat grated on the pebbly strand. Everything was very still, and he heard the oars rattle in the boat, as the tread of heavy feet crunched upon the beach.

Two curlews called, and then there was a long silence, a very long silence. . . .

. . . . . .

The grey dawn was just breaking in the east when Donald saw a man step from behind the bushes at the subway and look around. It was not light enough to see the boat, but a curlew call rang softly down the gully. It was at once answered from the boat. The man disappeared, but a quarter of an hour afterwards six haggard, white-faced men, each carrying a heavy swag, strode hurriedly down to the beach. Donald could see their faces as they passed. Several of them were ashy pale, as though haunted by some fearful deed of blood.

Donald watched closely. There would be eight at the meeting: Morgan, Milligan, Cordova, Blackie, Grimes, and Williams, with Skinner and Mrs Dalbert.

Neither Mrs Dalbert nor Skinner had returned! Donald still watched the entrance; but as he did so the rising sun cast a flood of light on sea and shore, and standing out to sea, with snowy sails, was a small schooner, and he knew that the gang had left Australia, intending never to return. Still he waited and waited, and at last once more entered the subway and reached the junction of the channels, and went on upon the dry pathway, where Meta Dalbert

and Owen Skinner, a few hours before, had stood and talked.

He continued his search until the passage abruptly ended. Flashing his lantern on the wall, he examined every nook and cranny, re-examined it again and again, put his ear against the wall and listened; but there was neither voice nor sound, nor any sign that living men had so lately passed along that water path and entered through that wall into chambers of mystery and crime.

"Dead!" exclaimed Donald; "or if not dead, dying in anguish and darkness, suffering by blood-stained criminal hands the retribution of an avenging Deity; and out upon that great and wide sea are their murderers. But they, too, and the sea which upbears them, are in the hollow of the hand of God."

CHAPTER XXXVI

GRANNY GRIMM'S PREDICTION

It was still early when Donald, rid of his disguise, arrived at "Dorset Park." Betty had been up for hours, and a fire was burning in the breakfast-room.

"I've scarcely slept all night thinking of you," she said, as she met him. "It was such a risk to have taken. I did not seem to realise it until you had gone. You had better drink a cup of tea, and eat something, and go to bed for a while."

"Oh, hang bed! I couldn't sleep if I tried," said Donald; "but I'll have a bath after the tea. Don't you want to know something?"

"Of course I do. I'm dying to know; but drink your tea, you're as pale as a ghost, and your eyes are wild and bloodshot. What a night of excitement you must have had."

"I have indeed. I've found out almost everything," said Donald, after he had drank of the refreshing beverage: "seen the gang; found the entrance to the caves from the gully; heard about Septimus; and, I fear, witnessed part of an awful tragedy."

"But about Septimus; is he really alive?" exclaimed Betty.

"I heard that he was . . . but . . . "

"But what? Surely this disgraceful report about a marriage is not true?"

"I heard her myself last night tell Owen Skinner

that she was married to him by a clergyman, and had the certificate in her possession."

"Then I don't believe it. It's too outrageous . . . absurd . . . impossible. . . . It's nothing but a wicked falsehood!"

She looked at her brother, waiting to see in his face some confirmation of her passionate denial; but there was no response.

"Do you believe it?" she demanded, tears in her eyes.

"I don't know what to believe," replied Donald slowly and sadly. "I feel dazed over the whole affair; but I feel sure that there has been a tragedy in those caves, and by this time she's probably dead."

"Thank God, then, for that!" exclaimed Betty, pacing the room in her excitement; "but," she continued, with a shudder, "didn't you say you overheard that woman talking last night?"

"I both saw her and heard her," said Donald; "she did not speak to me, but to Owen Skinner. I ought to ride in at once and let the police know all I saw and heard. Those two may be dying, and a search should be made immediately."

"Who for?" asked Betty, with a set face.

"For Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert."

Betty shook her head.

"Let me tell you the whole story," said Donald; "but do sit down and keep still."

Then he told her what he had seen and heard in the gully and tunnel, and of the departure of the schooner.

Betty listened, as well she might, with strained attention, and when he had finished sat for some time in silence.

Then she exclaimed, "What a night! and how brave you were. It's a wonder that you escaped from them alive."

They both drew closer to the fire, and a long conference followed. Donald was in a dilemma: he

wanted to engage in a search for Septimus at once, but felt that it was his first duty to inform the police about his discovery of the entrance to the caves, the departure of the schooner, and probable peril of Skinner and Meta Dalbert. Betty, however, had no scruples about leaving the criminals to their fate. Their first duty, she affirmed, was to Septimus; he was a prisoner somewhere, and might be ill or dying. The others might have left the caves after the sailing of the schooner. They knew the way in, and would know the way out. If they were dead, she argued, what was the use of raising a hue and cry about them? It would only result in bringing them all into unpleasant publicity again.

It was noticeable how the idea of her brother being alive, and not only alive but married to Meta Dalbert, had changed Betty in regard to him. Womanlike, she fretted her heart out over the brother she thought to be dead; but, as in other cases where sons, or husbands, or brothers were concerned, she thought it best for the other woman to be dead. If she was dead there was an end of it; but if not, she was Mrs Septimus Dorset.

"You see the police——" commenced Donald.

"No, no!" exclaimed Betty. "We'll go and talk everything over with Beatrice Ballantyne. Next to ourselves, she's the most interested party, and, as you say, has sources of information which may at this juncture be invaluable. That padlocked book, for instance, may contain information about La Perouse that would just now greatly help you."

"But, Betty," persisted Donald, "it's a serious offence to withhold information such as we possess; that schooner ought to be followed, and the gang should be arrested. It's like compounding a felony to let them escape. Then there are those two imprisoned, and probably dying, in the caves."

"Don't lose your head, Donald," said Betty, as she viciously stirred the fire with the poker to relieve

her feelings; "you men are always a bit soft when there's a woman in the case. She's a criminal; let her pay the penalty. Listen to me! We three have worked together in this matter for months. Last night you had wonderful good luck, and marvellous success. You did splendidly, and the affair is now entirely in our hands. As you say, the next step is to find out about Septimus: whether he is a prisoner at La Perouse or elsewhere; and you have to find out what this Granny Grimm and Tonk Daley really know about him. But if we call in the police, it will be taken out of our hands and made public, and, as likely as not, messed up. If it gets into the papers everyone connected with it will be put upon their guard. The criminal element will shut its mouth as close as an oyster, and if Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert are really dead, it's quite possible that Septimus may be spirited away or murdered to prevent his telling tales."

"But don't you think that Bruce would keep it secret, and be of great assistance?" urged Donald.

"The police can't keep things secret," said Betty. "Bruce would have to report to his superior officer, and he to someone above him. Secrecy is our only policy just now. Haven't we suffered enough already without a further scandalous sensation, and the whole of us being dragged through the mire again, and forced to give evidence at another trial in company with Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert? I'd sooner die, Donald!"

Donald was about to reply when a knock was heard at the door. The servants had been warned by Betty not to disturb them, and when the knock came, her passionate speech, which had brought tears to her eyes, left her fairly breathless.

"For goodness' sake," she whispered, "go and see who it is."

It was one of the housemaids. "Please, sir, Miss Ballantyne and Dr Strong are in the blue drawing-room."

Donald nodded to the girl. "Thank you," he said, and, shutting the door, faced his sister.

He knew exactly the trend of her thoughts, although for fully a quarter of a minute they looked at each other without speaking.

"What are you going to do?" asked Betty at last.

"I won't tell them anything until you come," said Donald.

"All right! I'll follow you in a couple of minutes; but don't mention this supposed marriage. It may be a lie, and if it isn't, she may be dead."

Donald hurried into the drawing-room with mixed feelings, for Beatrice was there, and Dr Strong, and he had a startling story to tell them.

Greetings, and explanations as to the doctor's unexpected return, were soon over, and after Betty had joined them, Donald re-told the story of his previous night's adventure. He also explained, for Dr Strong's benefit, some of the astounding revelations that had been discovered, during his absence, in the padlocked book.

"Well," said Dr Strong, "it's the strangest recital I ever listened to. And to think that all this villainy was going on under our feet, as it were, and we in utter ignorance of it all."

"Mr Dorset, you are quite a hero," said Beatrice, with tears in her eyes and wonder in her voice.

Donald's heart beat fast at her evident worship of him. Admiration is a royal road to love!

"Yes! Yes! Of course," said Dr Strong, as though he had just remembered something; "it was a very plucky thing to do."

There was a pause for a few moments after this, and then Dr Strong said: "By the way, I know Tonk Daley and Granny Grimm; neither of them bear very good characters. I've often wondered how the old woman managed to make a living off a couple of dozen hens and a goat. The place she lives in was built by a son of hers, a fisherman who was

drowned years ago. She's a likely character to be a tool in the hands of criminals. You say, Mr Dorset, that the boy told you he was often sent on messages to La Perouse?"

"He did," said Donald.

"Then," continued the doctor, "the position, according to the evidence we have before us, seems to be this: the active members of a gang of convict criminals, who had their quarters in the Caves of Shend, have left for some foreign part in a schooner, probably taking the proceeds of their robberies with them. Owen Skinner and Meta Dalbert are, for some reason unknown to us, left behind, possibly entombed, in a cave which we have been unable to discover. Your missing brother is a prisoner in some place at, or near, La Perouse, where, so far as I have ever heard, there is only dense bush and a few fishermen's huts. The first business certainly seems to be to make a searching inquiry into the truth of what you have heard about your missing brother."

"We have to rescue Septimus from these people," broke in Donald, who was getting weary of the doctor's sententious mannerism. "We need, too, to set about it at once," he added.

"Yes!" exclaimed both ladies in a breath.

"Then you may count upon me to assist you to the full extent of my ability," said the doctor warmly; "especially," he added, "as I am back several days before time, and my locum-tenens can go on with the work."

"Have you thought out any plan?" asked Beatrice of Donald, who, through his success on the previous night, had gone up greatly in her estimation.

"Not fully; but I have an idea of getting hold of Tonk Daley, and taking him out to La Perouse and frightening or bribing him to show us what he knows about the place, or the accomplices of the gang that may live there."

"Would it not be better first to interview Granny

Grimm," said the doctor. "She will know that the gang have cleared, and that the game is up, and will be the more ready to tell us what she may know about your brother. Let us go at once," he continued; "my man has the gig outside. Miss Ballantyne might wait, with your sister, our return."

The suggestion was hailed with approval by the whole party, and a few minutes afterward Donald and the doctor were on their way to Storm-Cliff.

. . . . . .

In the meantime, Tonk Daley had watched the departure of the schooner from a hiding-place he had among the rocks. He cowered there fearfully, for the belief that a detective was prowling around the gully on the watch was a source of alarm, if not terror, to him. He had had one or two unfortunate brushes with police-officers before.

"I'd best kip out o' the way of that blooming copper," he said to himself, as he lay low on some dry seaweed. So, having had his hunger satisfied at the "blooming copper's" expense, he determined to let his foster-mother "rip," and watch for any further happenings.

Thus it came about that Granny Grimm looked and called for Tonk in vain that morning. She, too, had seen the schooner depart, and cursed it vigorously with many lurid adjectives, as in the early dawn she had watched it sliding eastward toward the rising sun. Two ten-pound notes had been mysteriously left by someone, with a scrawl signed with a circle, the signature of the "Circular Letter," which bade her clean up at L.P., poison the rats, burn the shanty, and throw the stuff into the bay.

"D—— them!" she muttered bitterly; "that's all they've left me. Let them cover their tracks themselves, and when the grub's done the rats can starve. Curse them! Where's that imp? Tonk! Tonk!"

It was near midday, and the woman paused to think. "Can't 've taken 'im with 'em," she ejaculated.

She was strong and wiry for her age, and brandishing a stick, she peered, with evil eyes, into a shed abutting on the cottage. It was where Tonk Daley slept on straw covered with an old blanket and bags. The woman's fowls and goat were better cared for than this half-witted waif, whom some strange freak of fortune had flung in childhood at her door.

But he was not there.

Returning to the house, she was startled by the noise of a loud knocking at the door, and then, without ceremony, the latch was lifted, and into the disordered front room walked Dr Strong, closely followed by Donald.

"Excuse us, Granny," said the doctor. "We're in a hurry, and want to have a few minutes' talk with you."

"What do yer want?" asked the old woman, without any attempt at civility.

"We want to know who looks after Mr Dorset at La Perouse," said the doctor, watching the old woman to note the effect of his broadside, but she was too wrinkled and dirty for any mental surprise or emotion to show itself upon her face.

"Do yer mean the gentleman wot's dead?" she answered.

"I mean the gentleman who is supposed to be dead," replied the doctor.

"S'elp me, that's news. Who told yer?"

"Your adopted son, Tonk Daley," said the doctor, firing another shot at random. "At least he told someone I know about his journeys out to La Perouse."

"There's fishermen there," said the old woman.

"Now, don't waste our time," said the doctor sternly. "You know the schooner's gone and the game's up; we don't wish you any harm, and don't

intend to tell anyone outside of ourselves. Where's Tonk?"

"Haven't seen him this two days," said the woman stubbornly.

"Will you tell us what you know about Mr Dorset?" asked the doctor. "This gentleman is his brother, and we have heard things which prove to us that he is alive and a prisoner."

"How can I tell you what I don't know?"

"Very well then, we'll have to inform the police," said the doctor. "They'll get to the bottom of it."

"We'll get them to arrest Tonk," interposed Donald; "he's somewhere about in the bush."

"And how do you know that, mister?" asked the old woman, turning sharply upon Donald.

"Because he camped with me last night in the gully, and told me that you often send him on errands to La Perouse, and thrash him if he lies down to sleep by the way," said Donald.

The woman glared at him for a full half-minute before she answered: "How do I know that I can trust you?"

"Because you have our word for it," replied the doctor simply.

A cunning look came into the woman's face. "If the young gent will cross my hand with silver," she said, "I'll tell his fortune, and 't'as to do with another as well as 'imself."

"That's Septimus," ejaculated Donald, taking half a crown from his pocket, and offering it to her on the palm of his hand.

With her skinny fingers she caught his hand and made the sign of a triangle, with the silver, on his palm. Then she scanned his hand intently.

"There are ships upon the sea," she crooned, "and men waiting on the shore. I see two men, one dark and one fair; they love a beautiful woman, but the man she will love is on the water. I see a ship in distress on a stormy sea; the sea has swept

her deck and many are drowned. I see a man and woman dying; but it's too dark to see plainly who they are. There is another, a fair man, but I cannot tell whether he will live or die. But another fair man will die, and the dark man also, and the beautiful dark woman will marry one who is rich and powerful, and worthy of her love. What's this I see? A capital letter! Ah! It's plainer now. It reads like this, but I don't understand it; you may. 'Where the rocks are soft like velvet, and the waters gleam like glass. Over the sea or under the sea, look and hold it fast!'"

She dropped Donald's hand. "If you see Tonk," she said, "you can tell him that I told you he can take you to La Perouse."

At this she dropped the half-crown—as though to hear it ring as sterling silver—picked it up, and turned and left the room.

For a moment Donald and the doctor looked at each other as though each was busy with a troublesome thought, then Donald said, "She's mad; but there's no time to waste, let us look for Tonk and drive at once to La Perouse."

But they sought Tonk Daley for fully half an hour in vain. Part of the time he had been high up in the branches of a tall pine tree watching them.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LA PEROUSE ISLAND

An hour, or thereabout, after their interview with Granny Grimm, Dr Strong and Donald found themselves upon the shore of the small bay named after the famous but ill-fated French navigator, La Perouse.

It is near the entrance to the large expanse of water named by Captain Cook Botany Bay, which, as everyone knows, was deserted by the early colonists, under Governor Phillip, for Port Jackson. At the time of our story its shores presented a sandy, scrub-grown, undulating wilderness, uninhabited save for a few rough hovels occasionally occupied by fishermen.

The horse and gig had been left, concealed from observation, in charge of the doctor's groom, in a thick growth of bushes, as Donald and the doctor made their way around a rocky, sand-strewn point to where the long swell of the Pacific rolled half a mile wide between the heads.

It was low tide, and the scene which confronted them was sombre and dreary in the extreme. Overhead were long stretches of streaky grey-blue clouds, whose stiff, straight lines told of wind in the upper atmosphere, while at their feet heaved a great waste of leaden waters. Large numbers of gulls and shags and other sea-birds were resting upon jutting rocks and the rotting stumps of broken ti-tree, while the

shelving shore, where rocks outcropped from dull grey sand, presented a striking contrast to the white and yellow of the beaches in other parts of Botany Bay.

The tide was rising, and the shrill cries of sea-birds pierced the air, as the invading waters buffeted them off their rocky perches. Westerly, the wind-beaten clouds shone dully with a feeble reflection of the sun, which occasionally partly broke through its misty envelope and cast uncertain gleams, in splashes of light, upon the water; not golden, but a sickly silver gleam like glass. The birds flew low, occasionally touching the water, half a dozen at a time, flying south-west toward where a range of misty hills appeared across the bay, over which clouds were piled in fantastic heaps, like far-off mountains, their slopes burnished with dull gold, and their summits scintillating with quivering spears of light. Not a sail was to be seen upon the water, nor a living person on the long reaches of the shore.

"What a weird, murky, sombre scene!" exclaimed Donald as they stood together on a bit of rising ground which gave them a widespread view of bay and shore. "Even the occasional glimmer of sunlight adds to the melancholy aspect of the scene, and, as the old hag said, makes the waters gleam like glass."

This was the first reference either of them had made to the old woman's strange prediction; but the doctor did not take it up.

"Queer place, this Australia," he grunted. "Europeans would scarcely credit us with being able to produce a Stygian picture such as this; but we'd better keep along the shore, any buildings or sheds should be visible from there."

It was not possible, however, to see far inland from the shore-line, so they made their way to higher ground which commanded a view both inland and shoreward; but for a mile they came upon no sign

of any habitation. Rounding a point, however, another small bay opened up, a portion of which was heaped high with what, at a distance, appeared to be dark, iron-stained rocks; but closer inspection proved it to be a great accumulation of seaweed, piled from six to ten feet high, with singular fissures, the result of the buffeting of waves breaking in stormy weather upon the shore. Neither of them referred to it, but both recalled the old woman's words: "Where the rocks are soft like velvet."

"Without close examination," said the doctor, "an investigator would pronounce this shore-line covered with wave-worn rocks."

"Yes, it's singularly like a mass of rock, seen at a distance," replied Donald; "but what do you make of that island yonder?"

About half a mile away was a small island, seemingly overgrown with bottle-brush and ti-tree, with a few trees of larger growth in the centre, known as Moreton Bay figs. They stood and looked across at it for several minutes, but there could be seen nothing about it suggestive of human habitation.

"It looks as desolate and forbidding as the rest of the place," said the doctor. "I'm afraid, Mr Dorset, you've been altogether misled about what you might find here."

But Donald's eyes were fixed upon the island with strained attention. "What do you make of that?" he asked, pointing to a misty cloud of thin vapour which seemed to be hanging above the larger trees. "Is that mist or smoke?"

"It may be either," said the doctor, after a minute's pause; "but I think it looks more like vapour than smoke."

"We may be watched!" exclaimed Donald suddenly. "Would it not be better to get under cover in the scrub."

"Probably it would," replied the doctor absently,

as though his mind was preoccupied with other thoughts.

A quarter of an hour's close observation satisfied both of them that there was something happening upon the island; they heard sounds as of cattle, and once, for a very few minutes, the smoke was more perceptible, and for those minutes it partook of an unmistakable bluish tinge.

"Had it been a bright, warm day," said the doctor, "that smoke would have been absorbed more quickly by the atmosphere, and for all practical purposes would have been invisible; but it looks more like spray or vapour than the smoke of an ordinary fire. It's worth inquiring into; but the question is how are we to reach the island. What do you suggest?"

"Search about for a boat," replied Donald.

It was another half-hour, however, before their search was rewarded. In a declivity, to protect them from south-easterly winds, Donald discovered three rough sheds, which were evidently occasionally used by fishermen as temporary dwellings. There were no nets to be seen, nor signs of very recent occupancy; but in a large boat-shed adjoining was a dingy with sculls. There was room for a couple of fishing-boats to be housed as well, and signs were not wanting that larger boats were occasionally placed there. There was no appearance, however, of anyone having lately been about the place.

"I should think," said the doctor, after a careful scrutiny, "that this is a rendezvous for fishing-boats from other parts of the coast; possibly they come to fish in this bay, or only use it as a shelter when caught outside in bad weather."

"But why have they left this dingy here, if not to row over in it to the island?" said Donald. "Anyhow I suggest that we take French leave of it and row across. But how about your man? We may be gone a couple of hours or more."

"He will be all right," said the doctor. "I told

him to take the mare out of the gig if we were away long, and tie her up with her feed, and if he heard a shot fired to join us as quickly as possible."

The dingy proved fairly heavy, and as they, with some difficulty, hauled it down to the water, Donald said: "I don't see how Tonk could get this boat down alone."

"You will find that he has some other means of getting across to the island," said the doctor, adding cautiously, "if there is any truth in the story you have heard."

Donald, who was now visibly excited by the prospect of rescuing his brother, took the sculls and rowed the boat quickly through the water.

"You had better go round the island and see if there is any landing-place on the other side," said the doctor.

"All right," said Donald; "you keep a look out for any likely landing-place."

The island was about a mile in circumference, and after rowing around it, they decided to land on a bit of sandy beach. Here they were about to pull the boat well ashore, but Donald suddenly stopped.

"I don't think it will be wise for both to leave the boat," he said, "we do not know who may be upon this island; we may return to find the boat gone or stove in. I think you had better take the sculls and keep out a short distance from shore. If I am attacked I can come back to you, and if you hear two shots you might beach the boat and come to my assistance."

"I would sooner come with you," said the doctor; "but I think your advice is good."

On leaving the beach Donald found himself in a thick scrub of ti-tree and honeysuckle, interlaced in places with creepers, but he pressed through them in the direction of the larger trees, where they had seen the smoke.

He proceeded with the greatest quietness and

caution, for he was possibly in close vicinity to dangerous criminals. Revolver in hand, he pushed his way slowly through the scrub, keenly on the alert for any sign of life or human habitation.

Only those who have passed through a similar experience, or have acted as a scout in the country of an enemy, can in any way realise the strain upon both mind and body, as with finger on trigger a man presses into the unknown, his life possibly dependent upon the quickness of his eye and hand. But the thought of Septimus engrossed the mind of Donald, and he pushed resolutely on until, reaching the butt of the first Moreton Bay fig, he saw before him a grassy glade with a couple of cows grazing in the open.

The sight was so homely and peaceful that he threw caution to the winds, and, stepping out from the trees, walked over towards them. They seemed to take little notice of his approach.

"They must be used to seeing people," was Donald's mental comment.

The glade was not more than a dozen acres in extent, and to the south-west the ground rose in a kind of rocky terrace. After walking twice around the open, where he discovered no sign of living things except the cows, Donald climbed up upon the ridge. He was much inclined to go back for the doctor and consult with him, but for half an hour he examined the ridge, and walked to and fro, eagerly searching for some sign of human life. "There must be fresh water here," he thought, "for the cows could not exist without it."

He sat upon an outcropping rock and looked down upon the cows calmly feeding in the glade. Could it be possible, he thought, that the animals had strayed from their owner somewhere, and swam across to this island from the mainland. The thing was manifestly absurd. Then his thoughts swung back to the other extreme: it seemed to his excited mind

to be an island of enchantment he had happened upon. The grasses of the glade were so green and luscious, so unlike the bush grass of the mainland. Donald did not know much about agriculture, but he decided that the sward in front of him had at some time been sown with artificial grasses. "There must," he thought, "be a house of some sort somewhere upon the island." Then it occurred to him that it might be built somewhere in the scrub.

He was about to continue his search there when there stepped out from among the trees a man in a grey tweed suit. He had a couple of white pebbles in his hands, and tossed them with considerable skill from one hand to the other. He walked slowly over in Donald's direction, engrossed in throwing the pebbles from one hand to the other without dropping them.

There was no mistaking who it was! He was well dressed, and had the appearance of being in good health. It was Septimus Dorset!

Donald hurried down and meeting him with outstretched hand, ejaculated, "Sep., thank God I've found you!"

Without noticing the outstretched hand, his brother gravely lifted his hat, and, bowing, said:

"You have the advantage of me, sir. I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before. My name is Meta Dalbert, and by George it's very funny, but that's my wife's name too."

If Donald had been struck a stunning blow in the face he could scarcely have reeled under the physical blow more than he did under this shock to his mind and heart.

It was Septimus; but not Septimus. It was his own brother, but bereft of reason."

"Do you not know me? I am your brother Donald," he exclaimed.

"Ah! it's evidently a case of mistaken identity,"

came the reply. "I have no brother of that name. Are you good at catching pebbles? I find it a quiet but very interesting game. My wife is wonderfully expert at it; but I am practising, for it is important that a husband should be his wife's superior in all useful projects. See now," he said, "I can toss these two pebbles for several minutes without once dropping them; but I may tell you as a secret, that I shall have to practise very closely, for my wife can toss three."

"Have you seen Tonk Daley lately, Mr Dalbert?" asked Donald, seeking to discover if he might prove sane on other subjects.

"I never heard of the person," replied Septimus. "Tonk! Tonk! Strange name that; is it a boy or girl?"

"Where might you live, sir?" asked Donald, puzzled in his mind as to what to say or do next.

"Ah! that's a very important matter," said Septimus. "I'm keeping house alone just now, but my wife will be back to-morrow; and I may tell you that I can't ask you to lunch, for there's nothing left to eat in the house. In fact I'd be very pleased if you'd ask me to lunch with you instead. Later on I shall be happy to return your hospitality."

Donald, although wishful to see the place in which his brother had been in captivity, was fearful to risk a change of humour in his evidently demented brother, so he at once responded, "I shall be greatly pleased if you will do me the honour."

Septimus bowed low, and together they made their way to the boat. They found the doctor with the dingy close to shore.

"Look yonder," he said to Donald, "is not that the 'Circular Letter' schooner?"

Standing in, under fore-spanker jibs and topsails, the schooner was seen sailing through the heads.

"We're only just in time!" ejaculated Donald. "My brother's not himself," he whispered to the doctor; "remember he's a stranger, but I've invited him to dinner," and with that Donald leaned back upon his sculls and pulled for the shore.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE LAWYER'S RETURN

Dr Strong drove back with the groom beside him, Donald and Septimus occupying the back seat. The latter expressed himself as too tired and hungry to talk much, and hoped they had not far to go; he wanted to be back again before his wife returned.

"Very well," said Donald.

He did not want Septimus to talk; his own thoughts were very busy, and his heart full of foreboding as to how he should present his brother to Betty and Beatrice under these terribly altered conditions . . . besides, the doctor's groom could hear all that was said . . . and what might not Septimus say if he was once started talking!

This last thought suggested a world of apprehension to Donald regarding his demented brother. He was evidently as self-assertive in his madness as when he knew himself to be Septimus Dorset. He would, thought Donald, tell any stranger he met with that his name was Meta Dalbert, and inform them of his marriage, and of his residence on an island, and that his wife's name was the same as his, and that while he could only toss two pebbles, she could toss three.

Then as they drove swiftly along the sandy road, Donald recalled Betty's sorrow at her brother's loss; and when the first gleam of hope had come to them, how she prayed for his return, and yet loathed the

thought of a marriage with Mrs Dalbert. And this was the answer to her prayers!

"Poor Betty!"

There came also to his mind the thought of his mother, and then he thought of Beatrice; the latter would always blame herself for the unbalancing of his mind. Fortunately, Lady Dorset was away on a visit to Alice at Bourke; but what could they say that would prepare her for seeing her son like this? Supposing, too, that before her return he went about the mansion at "Dorset Park" telling the servants, and any people he might meet with, that he was Meta Dalbert? Any other name would not have mattered —but that name! Unless he should recover 'twas impossible to have him at large!

In the meantime the subject of Donald's anxiety and embarrassment was gazing with absurd interest at the houses and other objects he saw upon the road; he made some eccentric and offensive gestures at two men they passed, and one of them stooped to pick up a stone to throw at him.

Looking at him as he sat there, Donald was more disheartened by his appearance and conduct than on account of anything he had done or said previously. Every tie of relationship seemed to be severed. The man alongside him was an irresponsible idiot!

Better, thought Donald, and his heart ached with the thought, to place him in an asylum at once, and let their mother still think him dead, than have her see him thus.

He noticed now, to his surprise, that they had left the Sydney Road and were driving to Storm-Cliff, and as he did so the doctor turned round to him and said: "My sister is expecting me to dinner, Mr Dorset, so I think it will be best for us all to dine together; Storm-Cliff is nearer than 'Dorset Park.'"

A mutual glance passed between them, and with his eyes Donald thanked the doctor for his thoughtfulness. By this arrangement neither Betty nor Beatrice

would see Septimus until he and the doctor had had time for thought and consultation.

Shortly afterward the long-lost brother was safely housed in the doctor's study, where Donald and he were introduced to Dr Saphin, Dr Strong's locumtenens.

"Have a glass of sherry and a biscuit after your drive," said the doctor to them; "dinner will be in directly." And then aside to Donald: "You leave him here with us; we'll look after him. You go on home . . . they will be anxious . . . the gig is waiting outside."

Donald knew that Septimus would not miss him so long as his animal craving for food was satisfied, so he took the doctor at his word, and, leaving, grasped his hand with sincere respect and friendship. "I will return in two or three hours," he said, "and send your trap back at once. You're a spendid fellow, doctor, and I shall never forget your kindness."

"He's a good fellow himself," thought the doctor, when he was gone; "but it's not an easy thing to do justice to a rival. I wonder what there is at the back of that old witch's prediction?"

. . . . . .

Betty and Beatrice were waiting dinner when Donald arrived, and a disappointed look overspread Betty's features on seeing that her brother was alone.

"It's all right," said Donald; "we have found him, and fairly well; but the doctor wishes to keep him for to-night as he is somewhat upset in his mind, and needs quietness and medical attention. But I'm as hungry as can be; let's have dinner and I will tell you all about it over the coffee after we have dined."

Alas! Donald was at his wits' end to know how to tell the painful story of the day's adventure; but he was really hungry, and dinner was allowed to pass over without any further reference to Septimus or his state of health.

"I have a fire in the blue drawing-room," said

Betty; "we'll drink our coffee there, and you shall then tell us all about it."

"Not exactly *all*," thought Donald, "but I'll tell the story which I have to tell just as it occurred. It will be the easiest way to break the news of Sep.'s condition to them."

So he told them of the visit to Granny Grimm's (without, however, mentioning the fortune-telling episode); of how they could not find Tonk Daley, so went on to La Perouse alone; of how they saw smoke on the island, and found the boat; and how he had persuaded the doctor to let him land alone. Possibly, at one time, he would have given the doctor scant credit for his share in the adventure; but not now.

"Dr Strong is a fine man," was his comment; and Beatrice liked him all the better for his frank praise of one he knew to be his rival.

Both girls listened eagerly to the description of how he forced his way through the scrub, and then saw before him the glade and cows, and at last met with Septimus. He described his approach to him, tossing the two white pebbles, as he entered the glade, and how, on meeting him, Septimus did not recognise him or even know himself by his proper name.

"Surely," exclaimed Beatrice, "it was only a temporary lapse of memory of which he may soon be cured?"

"I hope so," replied Donald; "that's one reason why I have left him at the doctor's. I am going to drive over directly to see how he is, and, if you will allow me, I will take you home first and then go on to Storm-Cliff."

"I will go with you, Donald; I *must* see him," interposed Betty.

Donald saw by Betty's face that he would have to take her, and although reluctant to do so, thought that, after all, it was perhaps best for her to know the worst at once.

They reached the doctor's, after leaving Beatrice

at Woollahra, to find that Septimus had been tired after dinner, and had been persuaded, without very much trouble, to go to bed.

Dr Saphin had gone out to see a patient, so they sat by the fire to talk.

"What do you think of him, doctor?" asked Donald anxiously.

"It's a bad case of lost memory," said Dr Strong, after a long pause; "but recollection of the past might return to him at any time. He seems fairly sane in regard to ordinary things, but from a certain point his recollection of the past is a perfect blank. It's a very singular case; I would like to keep him here under observation for a few days."

"But I must have him home and nurse him, doctor!" said Betty impetuously.

"Have you told your sister," said the doctor, turning round to Donald, "that her brother is under an hallucination, and thinks that his name is Meta Dalbert?"

"No," replied Donald.

"You see, Miss Betty," said the doctor kindly, "you do not fully realise your brother's condition. Apart from some necessary consideration for your family, it would be impossible for you to do as you suggest. You may come and see him asleep, and you will understand better what I mean. Unless he recovers his memory and sanity in a few days, I see no alternative but for your brother to at once place him in an asylum. I doubt very much whether you ought to let his mother see him, and certainly Miss Ballantyne must not be allowed to. His association with Mrs Dalbert, who seems likely never to see him again, has been disastrous for him. It would be a satisfaction to us for him to have a lucid interval, if only to know what he has really gone through; but I had better tell you at once that there is unfortunately little prospect of a lucid interval. Dr Saphin and myself have examined him thoroughly, and find

that he has the mark of a healed wound on the head, which, in our opinion, precludes all hope of recovery. He seems docile enough now, but it is impossible to say how he might be affected in the future. His talk to-night at the dinner-table was that of an imbecile; he harps distressingly upon the one subject—that he is Meta Dalbert—and he eats like an animal. You will have to leave him with me until we can decide what had better be done with him."

Betty was crying; but although the doctor respected her grief and sympathised deeply with her, he felt that it was his duty to let her know the exact condition of her brother.

"Let us go and see him," she said.

Donald, the doctor, and Betty stood by the bedside of the sleeping man; the doctors had given him a whiff of chloroform when examining him, and he slept heavily. It was painful for anyone who had known and loved him before to see him now. Reason had evidently been so long dethroned that the ruin of the intellect had recast the features of the once clever lawyer in a different mould. He was no longer the Septimus Dorset that had been, but a mental derelict that needed to be saved from himself as well as from doing injury to others.

"My mother and Beatrice," said Betty thickly, her eyes suffused with tears, "must never see him now."

"You are quite right, Miss Dorset," said the doctor; "it is most painful and distressing for us all, but especially for you and your brother, and you have my deepest sympathy. In such cases as this, it is not the patient but the friends of the patient who suffer most. There is another, too, that we must not forget—the sooner Miss Ballantyne knows of this the better. It will be best, I think, for me to see her, and I will do so in the morning. I will tell her no more than is absolutely necessary, but sufficient to make her understand that your brother is an invalid,

and that we wish, for her own sake, that she should not see him again."

. . . . . .

"I hope you have good news for me about Septimus Dorset?" was the anxious inquiry of Beatrice, when she met the doctor on the following morning.

"His bodily health is all right," said Dr Strong, "but the terrible experiences he has passed through have left him weak in his mind."

"Can I go and see him? I want to tell him how much I blame myself for having put him to sleep in that room."

"It would do him no good," replied the doctor, "and for your own sake it is best that you should never meet him again."

"For my own sake! . . . Why should I be spared if by seeing him I can make any amends for the past? You know, doctor, I would do anything, make any sacrifice, that Septimus Dorset might be again restored to health."

"I know that; but I want to protect you from yourself, and from your self-upbraiding on account of things which you are not answerable for at all. Meta Dalbert is mainly the cause of the present mental affliction of the lawyer, and Septimus Dorset knew Meta Dalbert before he knew you."

"Is there nothing that I can do?" asked Beatrice, looking earnestly at the doctor.

"Nothing, except to forget," replied the doctor, smiling.

"I'm afraid I shall never do that," said Beatrice.

"Oh yes you will!" he replied, walking over to a side-table where a lovely collection of flowers was arranged. "What beautiful lilies you have here."

The doctor had come intending to say something which he now found it very difficult to give expression to. He knew very well that the present was not the time to urge Beatrice further on the subject that was nearest to his heart; but he was scarcely master of

himself as he beheld her beauty, and the fragrance of her presence intoxicated his mind. There had been no correspondence between them during his absence in New Zealand, and he dreaded their drifting away from the previous pleasant relationship which had been both familiar and affectionate. With a lover's intuition he felt that a change had come over Beatrice, and he feared that if they parted that morning without some expression of renewed attachment, his opportunity might be lost.

Yet how to break the ice sorely puzzled him.

Beatrice knew very well how he felt, and was sorry for him, and inclined to help him; but she had her own lion in the path to cause her apprehension, and a new thought had taken possession of the lady's mind, which was not favourable to the doctor's suit.

As he stood examining and admiring the flowers, and wondering how he should commence, Beatrice watched him, and doing so her thoughts ran this wise: "You're a handsome man, and I respect and admire you very much, I might even come to love you; but why should I, by an Australian marriage, bind myself, as it were, to a page of my life's history which I positively hate. You have been associated with the whole of this distressing episode. No doubt you have been wonderfully good to me, and befriended me to an extent that I probably only partially realise—you risked your life in that fatal room that you might help me, and, for aught I know, may, by your skill as a doctor, have saved my life; but will all this make for our mutual happiness if I consent to marry you?"

The reply of the girl's heart was a decided NO. She felt, at the present moment at any rate, that to marry Dr Strong would be to perpetuate in her mind the whole of that which she desired to forget and escape from. And the same applied to Donald; but not to the same degree. He was——

Probably, had Beatrice been really in love with either the doctor or Donald, her affection would have

swept much of this feeling aside; but evidently she was not, and so far as Dr Strong was concerned, there was a portion of her recently acquired knowledge which, unknown to him, she had brooded over until it had become a positive menace to her peace of mind. Her Uncle Hugh, as the reader already knows, was once a convict; and not only that, but was later allied with convict criminals. Donald knew it, and Dr Strong would have to know it; but why . . . why, she thought, *should her husband know it?*

"Doctor," she said, breaking a somewhat long silence, and speaking with an effort in a voice of studied humility and tenderness, her eyes fastened the while upon the flowers which adorned the side-table, "I have discovered something while you have been away which I shall find it very hard indeed to forget . . . even after I have left Australia. My uncle, Hugh Ballantyne, I have found out, was an emancipist, therefore at one time a convict, and, worse still, he seems to have belonged to the 'Circular Letter' gang. . . . I fear, too, that my Uncle Raymond had something to do with them. When 'Storm-Cliff Towers' was built by Isaac Shend, my Uncle Hugh's assigned servant, the caves beneath were the headquarters of the gang, and—— But, you know, I'm telling you this in confidence, so you will keep it a secret . . . even from Grace. Can you wonder, doctor, that I wish to get away from Australia . . . and . . . forget? Don't you think it would be better for me to marry . . . if I ever do marry . . . someone who neither knows nor wants to know about my Australian experiences or relations?"

Beatrice at this looked full at the doctor, but his discomposure exceeded anything she had expected. He was altogether taken aback by her astonishing disclosure. He stood there confused, hesitating as to how he should answer her; then stammered out: "I can't believe it!" Another unfortunate pause . . . and still he hesitated!

It was enough; the lips of Beatrice hardened, a blush of shame and mortification rose to her cheeks; she was about to speak, when suddenly the drawing-room door opened and a servant announced, "Sir George Cameron."

CHAPTER XXXIX

HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

FOLLOWING upon the entrance of Sir George Cameron, Lady Stirling was announced. They were there by agreement, in connection with a projected party to attend the opening of a newly completed Artesian Water Bore, which was the talk of the Colony. Sir George Cameron—a notable visitor, largely interested in English agriculture—had been invited to perform the ceremony, and he badly wanted Beatrice to be present. Sir Godfrey and Lady Stirling had already promised, and the latter had engaged to persuade Miss Ballantyne to make one of the party.

The doctor had looked reproachfully at Beatrice when she introduced him to Sir George, as though he would say, "I have not had a fair chance"; but on the arrival of Lady Stirling, and a remark of hers that their early visit was prearranged, Beatrice looked back at him, and the doctor understood her to mentally affirm, "You see it was not my fault that you had no further opportunity to say more."

Lady Stirling, always on the alert to keep Beatrice as far as possible away from a probable Australian husband, rejoiced greatly at their having disturbed what she thought might have been an important interview. To her mind, Beatrice was far too much under Dr Strong's influence, and she took good care that

there should be no more private conversation with the doctor before he left, which shortly after he did.

Sir George Cameron was too much of a society man to unduly prolong a morning call; but it was a relief to Beatrice to listen to the bright chatter of one who was only on a visit to Australia, and who drew upon his travels and English experiences for topics of conversation.

Beatrice, who was still obsessed with gloomy thoughts, presently said, "You don't talk much about Australia, Sir George."

"And they've treated you splendidly!" interjected Lady Stirling.

"I'm positively enamoured of the colonies!" exclaimed the baronet.

"Then you should throw in your lot with the colonists, and stop here, and help forward the great future which they tell us is the destiny of this sunny land," said Lady Stirling, who knew very well that this was the last thing Sir George Cameron would have thought of doing.

"Ah, that does not follow," he replied, laughing. "You may be honestly in love with a country and yet not wish to live in it."

"Or with a woman and not wish to marry her," said the lady slyly.

"No, I do not say that," replied the gentleman emphatically. "The love of country partakes very much of sentiment and admiration, but one's love for a woman is a very different thing; and any true man that loves will naturally wish to have the loved one for his own. But my admiration for this great land is quite consistent with my love for England. Australia is a fine country for the native-born, whose friends and interests are here, and it's a good place for other countries' have-nots. A man who wants to make a start, and get on, can't do better than settle in Australia; but people whose aspirations in the matter of wealth are mostly realised, who possess a

home and friends and worthy ambitions in the land of their birth, don't make good colonists. My friends want me to go into the House of Commons—they tell me I have gifts that way—but I'd be like a fish out of water in colonial politics, or at any rate I should feel that the swimming area was rather small. *You* will understand me, Miss Ballantyne, I am sure, being an Englishwoman. I take no notice of Lady Stirling yonder, because she often talks on purpose to draw me out; but I shall have to make a spread-eagle speech from the Australian standpoint at the opening of the Bore."

"I understand your feeling," replied Beatrice; "but I think you scarcely do this country justice. These Australian cities, for instance, are wonderful places for their age, and is it not a fine ambition to be identified with people who are laying the foundations of probably the last great nation to be established upon this planet?"

"Very good, Miss Ballantyne, very good indeed!" exclaimed the baronet, smiling; "but there's one thing which I believe we all three crave for that Australia cannot give us."

"Whatever is that?" asked Lady Stirling.

Sir George smiled at her ladyship and said, "I will tell you, but please pardon a digression. I once went for a long voyage on a sailing vessel," he concontinued, addressing his conversation specially to Beatrice. "You know, Miss Ballantyne, I'm regarded by my friends at home as a singularly fortunate man. Even when I don't deserve good luck I seem to get it. Well, my people declared it was rank folly to do what I did; but we had a wondrously fine trip, although it was winter, and we entered the English Channel under full sail, with splendid weather, after a record run. That night at dinner, after we had caught our first glimpse of the white cliffs of old England in the run up the Channel, the captain gave us a toast. His name, by the way,

was Cosey, and it suited him admirably; he was a fine seaman, but he always looked comfortable and pleased. I shall never forget how he stood up with a smile upon his face that evening and said, 'Fill your glasses, ladies and gentlemen. Here's to the wives and sweethearts whose loving hands hold the tow-line that has brought us so quickly home.' We drank the toast and sang 'For they are jolly good fellows'; but I have often thought since that it's the hands which reach across the sea that hold us so strongly to the scenes and associations of our early days."

"You are not going to say that up at the Bore next week," said Lady Stirling; but she smiled, notwithstanding the implied criticism, for she was immensely pleased with the digression of the baronet.

"No," replied Sir George; "but that explains why I could not settle in Australia, with all its magnificent prospects and resources. I have a nook in the sun elsewhere. That's the difference between the well-to-do English-born and the well-to-do Australian-born. They are proud out here to be British, and they glory in the traditions of the Empire; but for them there are no hands upon a tow-line that pulls them to the little land in the North Sea. They visit England, but find it different to Australia; so much so that they return and, more often than not, run the Old Country down, and really I don't blame them. They are used to magnificent distances, and in England everyone lives next door. Jack is as good as his master here, but there's more aloofness in the old land. Then it's often cold and inclement there, with gloomy skies, and your native-born Australian can't stand a clouded sky; it makes him serious, and he cannot bear to be serious for long. He hates melancholy as much as smallpox. So they pack up and return to this island continent more Australian than ever. I always wish good luck to them; they're fine fellows, but a restless race. I must not, how-

ever, detain you ladies longer," he continued. "Lady Stirling is coming with Sir Godfrey, and I shall be delighted, Miss Ballantyne, to be honoured by your presence as one of our party."

Sir George Cameron having gone, Lady Stirling turned to Beatrice and said: "I'm going to stay to lunch, little girl, and take you with me shopping this afternoon. We're going home next month, and I may tell you as a bit of additional news, so is Sir George Cameron, and I want you to arrange your business affairs and come by the same steamer. There's nothing to keep you here now."

"It's rather sudden, Connie, is it not?" replied Beatrice.

"It may appear so; most things that are worth while seem to come suddenly. Sir Godfrey has seen and said and done all he wants to at present, and I wish to get him away before he starts upon some new investigation or discovery."

Beatrice looked into the fire; it was her turn now to hesitate. She felt that the Strongs and Dorsets had been too much her friends not to be consulted beforehand—especially Donald. Beatrice had an English conscience, and it occurred to her that in her position she ought not to leave Australia so abruptly. Everything was still in a mess, as it were. "The Towers'" property was unsold; Septimus had to be thought of; and she remembered with horror those two criminals who were probably lying dead together in a cave beneath the ruins. The police might want to do something about them, and about the schooner; they might want to see the padlocked book! She had thought of doing something for Tonk Daley, and there was Grace and Betty to be thought of . . . and Donald.

She got into quite a reverie over Donald, and sat looking into the fire so long that Lady Stirling at last exclaimed:

"Whatever are you thinking about, Beatrice?"

"I was thinking what a strange thing life is . . .

to some people," she added, after a pause, "and how different to others. There's Sir George Cameron as light-hearted as a boy, with all his big estate in England, and multitudinous business affairs which must require his close attention."

"I admire him immensely for his very light-heartedness," said Lady Stirling seriously. "He carries heavy responsibilities without effort, because he is strong. To do things easily is the reward of efficiency, and Sir George laughs and jokes as he labours, because he is a fine, strong, capable man—healthy in body and well equipped in mind. An American is reported to have said: 'Hitch your wagon to a star,' and a girl of your temperament, my dear, ought—if she has the chance—to hitch herself to a man of hopeful, cheerful disposition."

"Like Donald Dorset," said Beatrice demurely; for she knew very well that by hook or by crook Lady Stirling intended to marry her to Sir George Cameron.

"No, little girl; do you think that I would agree to your marrying into a family where you may find, to put it as kindly as possible, latent insanity?"

"I don't think that is so; the condition of Septimus is due to accident. Why, if he heard you, Donald would break his heart."

"Not he; he will marry an Australian, and be far happier with her than he would be with you, or you with him. A girl with your temperament and wealth, and social environment, ought to marry an Englishman and settle down in the land of your birth."

Beatrice looked into the fire without speaking; she was thinking of the night of the ball when, for the sake of herself and others, Donald played a hero's part in the Caves of Shend.

But Lady Stirling, only faintly guessing at her companion's thoughts, continued her homily.

"There's another thing, too, which should make you hesitate to marry an Australian. If you have

had your eyes open you must have seen that the love of home and offspring, which for centuries has distinguished the English character, is largely wanting in the upper-class, native-born Australians. They are, as Sir George Cameron says, a restless race. The women hanker after the gaieties of the cities, and the men live largely on their stations and in their clubs, and are always on the make, as they say. Few of them are great readers, or particularly intellectual, or religiously inclined; so the sports-ground and race-course and gambling habit have resulted—especially among the class I refer to—in a vacillating, national character, which is bad enough in public life—at the polling-booths and in parliament—but worse when it has to be faced daily in the home. And remember this, little girl: marriage does not change character, as thousands of infatuated men and women have discovered when it was too late, to their cost."

"All of which means, Connie, that you hold a brief for Sir George Cameron."

"Nothing of the sort, my dear; it means that I want you to come back with us to England, and remain unmarried until your heart is fairly won by one of your own people."

"You mean well, Connie, and I love you very much; but you are a most unmerciful critic of Australia and Australians. You know they are just as British as we are, and they're not all like that—at least Donald——" She was going to say more, but just then the gong sounded for lunch, and Beatrice remembered something. Both ladies rose from their chairs, and as they did so Lady Stirling—a tear in her eye—kissed Beatrice.

"I want to see you happy, little girl," she said.

CHAPTER XL

JUSTICE WITHOUT LAW

It seemed to Beatrice after this as though a new element had come into her life, antagonistic to Australia. Not that she encouraged it; but Lady Stirling's words had impressed her far more than she willingly acknowledged, even to herself. Her dreams were increasingly unpleasant, and she felt that, as indicating her state of mind, this was not a good sign. She had read somewhere that people's dreams are the wandering visions of their subconscious thought—that what people are, they dream. Her dreams were now almost always associated with "The Towers," the caves, or the padlocked book. Isaac Shend, her uncles, Septimus Dorset, Dr Strong, and Grace posed largely in them; but never in a way that was pleasing to the mind. She noted with pleasure, however, that she never dreamed of Donald in these distressful dreams.

She would frequently awaken with a start, and then remember with intense relief that "The Towers" were burnt down, and Isaac Shend and a number of other people long since dead. It is not surprising that her short but tragic experience of colonial life became more and more distasteful to her.

One day she told all this to the doctor, who now realised that what had become to him a passion was to Beatrice only a grateful sense of appreciation and respect. He had been her very good friend, and, like other women, she might, on persuasion, have married

him out of gratitude and for the esteem in which she held him, and have joined the grey sisterhood of married women united to men for whom they never had a supreme affection; but the doctor, after hearing what Beatrice had to say, turned a deaf ear to the pleading of his own passionate heart, and thinking only of the welfare of the woman he loved, advised her to return with the Stirlings to England.

Probably Beatrice would have taken his advice straightway had the Stirlings been travelling alone, for largely through Donald's assiduity the tangled skein of her business affairs was being reduced to order. Donald had gone into the office after the disappearance of his brother, and had found the big Ballantyne estate a very complicated matter to deal with; but much had been arranged, and several properties had, at the wish of Beatrice, been sold. There was a purchaser for the Storm-Cliff estate; Septimus had been placed in an asylum recommended by Dr Strong; Tonk Daley was in the hands of the police, to be put into a reformatory institution; and other matters were unexpectedly adjusting themselves.

Beatrice might now leave for England with Lady Stirling as chaperon, but Sir George Cameron had booked his passage by the same steamer, and she was far from having decided to give him the opportunity he evidently very much desired—that of a long sea voyage in her company, with a friend at hand as favourable to his suit as was Lady Stirling.

"If I go to England with him on that steamer," thought Beatrice, "Connie will make me marry him."

The result of these cogitations was that Beatrice excused her delay in coming to a decision, on a plea of important business still unsettled, and promised Lady Stirling to tell her definitely on the very day after the opening of the Bore.

"I shall have a good opportunity of studying him a little more," thought Beatrice, although she guessed that her friend Connie would tell Sir George, who, on

account of the very uncertainty of what Miss Ballantyne might decide to do, would be on his very best behaviour.

It will be seen that, so far, no matter how much Beatrice liked the baronet and admired his good qualities, she was not in love with him. That might come, no doubt, for the best of women take matters of the heart more cautiously than do the best of men. A man will fall in love at first sight, but rarely a woman; and Beatrice had become so used to being admired, and loved, and served, that she was, as the saying is, a bit spoiled. Sir George Cameron was, no doubt, a man to be desired and loved. Beatrice was well aware of this, and knew also that scores of beautiful and well-born English girls would have jumped at the chance of becoming Lady Cameron; but the present mood of Beatrice was: she might and she might not, she would and she wouldn't. Sir George hadn't risked his life for her, as had Donald, who, she knew, was brave and loyal; but of this she had no information in regard to Sir George. He sent her beautiful flowers, and Lady Stirling vouched for his being in love with her, and that he would make her a splendid husband. Certainly he had wealth, rank, and character; but, thought Beatrice, "a man's love is mostly selfish, and the baronet loves me because he wants me."

Then her thoughts would rush off at a tangent to Donald. What a pity it was that he was an Australian, and associated in her mind with "Storm-Cliff Towers" and those wretched caves. Was she not leaving Australia on purpose to forget, and to marry someone that did not know?

It will be difficult probably for the reader to in any way realise the imperious sway which this thought had secured over the mind of Beatrice. Just now it dominated her will, and demanded the shutting out of both Donald and the doctor from her life. She intended to leave Australia for ever, and as far as

possible have no correspondence with it. Sir George, or some other Englishman, would introduce her to a new circle of friends, and place around her a new social environment, where she would never hear of an Uncle Ballantyne, but would dream new dreams and live a new life, and, in time perhaps, forget.

It was a point in Sir George Cameron's favour that he never once referred to Miss Ballantyne's Australian relations, to "The Towers," or the trial, or any other unpleasant matter. Sometimes she thought that he associated her only with her residence at Woollahra, but further thought told her that he must have heard about her uncle and her inheritance of "The Towers" and its unhappy sequel. He would, of course, know nothing about her uncle's past, and the "Circular Letter," or the caves below "The Towers"; but then again, he might. He was not the sort of man to move about in society without getting to know things. Suppose that he did know, and when they fell out, as most people did at some time after marriage, taunted her with having had convict relations!

It may surprise the reader that a well-to-do woman like Beatrice should have taken these things so much to heart. She was not to blame for her uncle's misdeeds, but the thought that she had been made rich with what people called "tainted money" worried her. Then she carried in her bosom the awful secret of the caves, and the dead criminals hidden there; and she took blame to herself about Septimus Dorset. It is not surprising that, rich as she was, and young and beautiful, she more than once wept over her unhappy life in Australia.

She saw a good deal of Donald about this time, owing to certain business matters; he was always bright and pleasant, never referred to the painful past, and his whole bearing towards her was that of a gentleman and devoted friend—but he was Australian!

It will be remembered that some time before, Beatrice had given Donald to understand that while present cares engrossed so much of her attention there was no room in her heart for serious thoughts about the future. He recalled the very words she had spoken—spoken with tears in her eyes: "I love you all, and Betty and Grace too; but I don't want to talk about such a sacred thing as love while these affairs remain unsettled."

Donald knew that things were getting much more settled now, but he hesitated to speak again for fear that it might be too soon. He knew enough of Beatrice to regard her evasion as favourable, but kept himself in hand, for man is masterful when hope is strong, and impatience has wrecked many a hopeful project. The baronet had no little advantage, being an Englishman, and Donald knew that his safest course was, for the present, to do nothing. One thing cheered him: Beatrice admired and respected his courage, and seemed fearful of offending him. He thought this a good sign, for there is an element of fear in the highest form of love.

As might be expected, the strained situation with the Strong family had become much less apparent. Beatrice and Grace were more often together, and the old-time friendly relations with the doctor were, to outward appearances, re-established. Beatrice was much happier in her mind that she could talk freely again with Grace and the doctor, but she little knew the strength of Dr Strong's affection for her, or the depth of his disappointment, or the largeness of his self-renunciation, to secure her peace of mind and happiness.

In the meantime important events had transpired, and were pending, in the Dorset family. Donald and Betty had received a considerable accession of fortune through the death of a maiden aunt, and Lady Dorset had returned home from Bourke possessed of a new idea. She had been told nothing about recent matters

concerning Septimus, and believing him to be dead, had decided to rent "Dorset Park" and start, almost immediately, on a long visit to Europe. Alice had advised her to this for the sake of Betty and Donald, as well as herself.

"Mother," she had said, "you all three of you want a thorough change, right away from Australia; and what's the good of money if you don't do something with it?"

Betty fell in with the proposal at once, but Donald hesitated; he feared that it might appear to Beatrice as a planned thing, and that she might resent his following her to England. But Betty, with her usual impetuosity, told him that she and the mater were going, and that he would have to go and take care of them; so to gain time he compromised the matter with her by promising to give her a decided answer about the trip to Europe on the day after the opening of the Bore. He did this in ignorance of Beatrice's promise to Lady Stirling, or anyone else's arrangements, and the coincidence is only one other of the strange happenings which are, after all, not so very uncommon in this mundane life.

Beatrice had told Donald herself that Sir Godfrey and Lady Stirling wanted her to return with them to England, and that Sir George Cameron had booked a passage by the same steamer; but as they had booked some time in advance, there was no hurry for her to decide until certain business matters were settled. Those matters had now been settled for several days, but Donald had not heard that Beatrice had come to any decision.

The ceremony of the opening of the Bore was, of course, a public affair requiring no special invitation; but invitations had been issued to certain of the élite by the municipal authorities, and Lady and Miss Dorset, and Donald Dorset, J.P., were among those invited to the grand-stand and the luncheon which was to follow the ceremony. In addition to which, Lady

Stirling had sent them a cordial invitation to join their party. Coming from Lady Stirling, this had puzzled Donald, for he knew of her ladyship's plans for Beatrice's future; but he did not know her real motive, or guess how expert she was at matchmaking. Had she known, it was a more risky expedient than she had bargained for; but her intention was to use Donald as a stimulus to Sir George's attentions to Beatrice, which might, she thought, develop even into a proposal, for her belief was that even the most ardent of lovers will show himself to better advantage when there is a possible rival in the field.

Amid the bustle of preparation, on the evening before the party started north to be present at the ceremony, the public heard news of the tragic loss of a schooner off the Queensland coast. Dr Strong, on his way home, had bought a newspaper, and he greeted Grace with a smile of satisfaction such as had not often of late been seen upon his face.

"Whatever has happened, John?" exclaimed his sister.

"An act of providential justice," he replied; "justice without law. Those criminal murderers of the 'Circular Letter' gang have met with a ghastly retribution; they are every one of them dead, and, with the schooner, are at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. The public," he continued, "only know a portion of the story, and it's not worth while for any of us to enlighten them. I will read you the account given by the newspaper; it is entitled 'The Wreck of the *Hamlet's Ghost*; A Strange Story of the Sea.'"

"It will be remembered," commenced the newspaper paragraph, "that a few months ago the Australian Bank was victimised to a large amount by certain persons whose names, for good and sufficient reasons, were at the time suppressed. So cleverly was the matter carried through that certain information had to obtained from abroad before any arrest

could be attempted. It was strongly suspected at the time that a man named Cogger Morgan, a resident of Storm-Cliff, was a principal in the affair; but the necessary proof to secure conviction was wanting. By a singular coincidence this evidence came to hand by yesterday's European Mail, but at the very time that a warrant was being prepared for the arrest of the person referred to the captain of the *Coral Gem*, one of the Pacific Island Company's vessels, brought the news of the man's death, with other suspected criminals, who were said to be passengers by the *Hamlet's Ghost* to Batavia.

"The captain's remarkable story is as follows: 'On the 25th of March, in 18 deg. 43 min. S. lat., 147 deg. 57 min. E. long., 76 miles in a direct line from the Port of Townsville, we sighted a small schooner on fire on our port bow. We were running at the time before a moderate cyclone, not uncommon in that month in the North Pacific, and saw her, while still on fire, strike a reef and founder. Sailing back, after the storm, on the following day, we came upon a man clinging to some wreckage, whom we rescued. He died the next day, being the last survivor of the ill-fated schooner. He was very weak, but managed to tell us that the schooner's name was the *Hamlet's Ghost*, and that she had left Botany Bay about a fortnight earlier, and was bound for Batavia. In addition to the captain, she carried a crew of five seamen, and also five passengers beside himself. His name, he said, was Cogger Morgan, and the others were Milligen, Cordova, Blackie, Grimes, and Williams. They had had a drunken quarrel with some of the crew, and a fight had ensued in which the captain, whose name was Davien, and two of the crew were shot and thrown overboard. The man Cordova had been knifed by the captain, and, half drunk, had, in revenge, fired the cuddy, where the spirits were stored. As the schooner burst into flames, the hurricane struck them, carrying away the missen-mast and

every stitch of canvas. During the mêlée they had got out of their course, and ten minutes afterwards she struck a reef. The rescued man seemed to have no recollection of how he managed to save himself on the wreckage. He said he had received some internal injury, and lay for hours unconscious. Shortly before he died he was heard muttering curses against some man and woman, chained to the wall of a cave, but nothing coherent could be made out of his raving. He died shortly afterward, and the following day we buried him at sea.' "

The newspaper account closed with the statement that inquiries had been made by the police about the men mentioned in the captain's report, some of whom had been residents of a Sydney suburb, but nothing of importance was known about them or the schooner, except that she had previously been in the coastal trade, upon the northern rivers. Further inquiries were being made in the matter, and it looked as though justice had overtaken, at least, one criminal, the person of Cogger Morgan, whose death had put an end to the proceedings about to be instituted by the bank.

"So that's the end of the scoundrels!" ejaculated the doctor. "Thank God! the Colony's rid of them for good."

"They have been justly punished for their crimes," said Grace, shuddering.

"Yes," replied the doctor, "they have indeed been justly punished, and we may be thankful that it is so; it might have been different had they been arrested and defended by a clever lawyer at quarter-sessions. It's a pity that the innocent crew should have suffered with them, but in this imperfect world the innocent always seem to have to pay for the misdeeds of the guilty."

"But, John, you don't know that they were innocent," said Grace.

CHAPTER XLI

THE OPENING OF THE BORE

BENEATH a statue of a late Earl of Shrewsbury, placed in the midst of one of the largest and loveliest gardens of England, there is inscribed the legend "He made the desert smile." The Earl brought water by a conduit for twenty miles to a romantic portion of his estate, and with that water he turned the desert into a world-famous garden.

Such is the change that is being wrought by irrigation in Australia. There is no country in the world so extensively supplied with Artesian and sub-Artesian water, and at the time of our story it was foreseen by practical men that the exploitation of this wonderful gift of Nature would very soon open up vast areas in the interior, which had before been regarded as useless desert.

It was a great day for Appledore when water was struck in the Great Northern Bore. The work had swallowed up a mint of money, and occupied years of anxious toil. Boring chisels had been lost, to recover which had absorbed months of delay, and boring rods broken, until the Town Councillors were bordering on despair; but one day, at the depth of nearly two thousand feet, the boring-rods suddenly dropped yards without opposition, and the result was that a stream of water, at a high temperature, dis-

charged itself like a huge fountain at the rate of over one million gallons in twenty-four hours.

The whole Colony was astonished and gratified. Some timorous folk wanted the Government to cork it up again lest the supply should become exhausted; but thoughtful men saw in it the inauguration of a new era for the great interior plains of Australia. One prominent squatter declared that this great water discovery would result in the production of a thousand bales of wool in the place of every one then exported. There would be irrigation farms, and great sheep runs in places where a bandicoot could scarcely before find sustenance. The newspapers declared that it had added renewed confidence in Australia's national resources, and that the immense supply of underground water, available over thousands of square miles of the arid interior, was a revelation, the value of which could only be realised by those upon the spot. The discovery of gold had been an epoch in the history of the country; but it was of small account compared to the discovery of abundance of good water.

Thus it will be seen that the occasion now referred to was one of great importance, and it was no small honour for Sir George Cameron to have been invited by the Mayor and Municipality of Appledore to perform the opening ceremony.

The visitors went up to the township in a special train, crowded with Members of Parliament and other notables, who were sumptuously entertained at the Government's expense. Sir George Cameron was of course the man of the hour; it was expected that he would make an important speech, and representatives had been sent up by the leading newspapers to furnish verbatim reports of the speeches and proceedings. The Governor would have been present, but was away south on a visit, and the Premier was unfortunately absent in New Zealand. However, there were many distinguished politicians and visitors present,

and Lady Stirling watched with satisfaction the effect which the popular homage rendered to the Baronet had upon Beatrice.

Sir George was accustomed to pose in the limelight, and rose to the occasion with becoming dignity, making himself at home with every one in genuine Australian fashion, and it was easy to see that his debonair self-possession and gentlemanly courtesy impressed Beatrice not unfavourably.

Sir George had met Donald and his sister Betty before, and greeted them with marked cordiality; but his attentions to Beatrice were very marked, and more familiar than Donald thought at all necessary.

Betty asked her brother whether he was sure that Beatrice was not engaged to the Baronet, and Donald replied, "You had better ask her," which Betty accordingly did.

Beatrice, willing to tease her friend, and probably also her brother, said, "No, Betty, it has not gone so far as that yet; but he is very nice, isn't he?"

"I don't think he is half as nice as Donald," was Betty's blunt reply.

There was nothing serious, however, for everyone was good-humoured, and possessed with the festive spirit of the day, and laughter and repartee seemed as natural to the gay crowd as is a butterfly in the sunshine.

The Mayor and councillors, in official regalia, met their visitors at the railway station, and presented Sir George with an address of welcome. They had a carriage and four horses in waiting, lent by a wealthy squatter whose run was nearest to the Bore, and with the Mayor beside him, and two councillors on the opposite seat, Sir George was driven in state, first to the town hall and then to the Bore, which was located about two miles from the township.

It had been a question as to how the visitors should get out, for it was too far to walk, and local buggies were not in favour with the smart set. Sir Godfrey

and Lady Stirling had been provided with seats in the members' drag; but guessing how they might be situated, a number of the more stylish visitors had arranged for a riding party to the Bore, and Beatrice had sent "Crusoe" up with her groom, and Donald had his man there with the famous "Tomboy" and a chestnut hack for Betty. Riding-habits had been donned while the gentlemen were entertained with light refreshments at the town hall, and when the cavalcade started for the Bore, it was graced with quite a number of fashionables on horseback. They were in high spirits, for the whole affair was a new experience to most of them, and thoroughly unconventional.

Arriving at the Bore over a level tract of country, the flow of water was found to be prodigious; but it seemed to many of them a very prosaic and homely affair. Lady Stirling said it looked as though a street water-main had burst, with the intention of flooding all creation; but she was extra critical, for Sir George had somehow scarcely come up to her expectations. She expected to see the Baronet ridiculously in love with Beatrice. To quote her own illustration, as she looked at the fair form of Beatrice, she thought the kettle ought, by this time, to be boiling over; but Sir George was so taken up with his position that it scarcely seemed to simmer. Donald was evidently having the time of his life with Beatrice, notwithstanding Sir George.

Donald was a handsome man on horseback, as indeed on foot, and as he rode with Betty and Beatrice, the latter was reminded of other rides, on other days, in the vicinity of Woollahra and Storm-Cliff. Beatrice rode well and loved it, and Donald's bearing to her was perfect, while Lady Stirling was not quite sure that her stimulus was not affecting Beatrice and Donald more than Sir George.

However, the Baronet made a very timely speech when declaring the Bore open. He had come, he

said, from a land that was near and dear to every heart in Australia—the land which they all still called home. There he had had large experience in practical agriculture. He believed in the good old toast, "Speed the plough"; but in Australia he had found much that was new, not to say contradictory, to his previously formed opinions. He had expected to find in the colonies a sort of pocket edition of the old land; but instead he found a personal initiative and originality that gave the Anglo-Saxon of Australia a fine and distinctive character. They were no doubt the heirs of a marvellously rich and generous land. For its size, Australia was the most self-contained country on the face of the globe. Within its own sea-girt coast it could produce all that its population needed for clothing, food, and shelter. In the north sugar, tea, cotton, silk, coffee, rice, and all tropical and sub-tropical products could be grown; in the south they produced wheat, barley, oats, flax, and English fruits and vegetables; and all through the continent, from Port Darwin to Melbourne, wool could be grown, live-stock raised, and gold and silver, coal and iron, and other minerals found in rich profusion, while around them on all sides was a natural inexpensive fortification, teaming with food. Moreover, they had no wars, no standing armies to maintain, and no native difficulties to impede their progress. They had no long, rigorous winters such as prevailed in Canada to keep the land dormant five months out of the twelve. Whatever might be their climatic disadvantages by reason of floods or droughts, there was absolutely nothing which irrigation, Artesian Bores, pluck, energy, and determined perseverance might not conquer.

He closed his speech, which was punctuated with applause, by pointing out what irrigation had accomplished in other lands, and predicted for Australia a time in the near future when its arid central plains would be covered with a network of railways, which

would connect thriving towns and villages in the centre of great agricultural settlements, and when its prosperity would attract to their shores tens of thousands of the world's enlightened, enterprising, and industrious workers, and lift their country to a position of influence, wealth, and power in the Southern Hemisphere which would make them one of the foremost nations of the globe. The opening of that Bore marked another stage in the progress of Australia; he had heard of their drawbacks and disappointments in the past, but the country was working out its own salvation faster than anyone had dared to hope, and with the advent of bounteous supplies of water for irrigation, Australia would soon find itself emerging out of the mists and darkness of depression, into the warm light of brighter and more prosperous days.

"That chap can talk," said a local farmer; "but I'm wondering what there is left for him to say after we have eat lunch over at the race-course grand-stand."

It was true; Sir George's speech had run away with him, and he had used up much of what he had prepared for his after-dinner speech.

Betty had listened to the flow of eloquence with some astonishment, but was still of opinion that Donald could do quite as well, if not better, when the occasion demanded it. So the carriage and four, the members' drag, and a multitude of other vehicles started for a grand parade of the township, to be followed by the luncheon in the dining-hall below the race-course grand-stand.

The grooms were waiting with the horses, and as it would not be etiquette for the riding party to precede the Mayor's carriage, it was decided that to avoid the dust they should keep well in the rear. Betty had picked up a gentleman acquaintance for her escort, so it came about that, as before, Beatrice and Donald rode side by side.

"Well, what did you think of Sir George Cameron's speech?" asked Beatrice.

"I thought that it was well calculated to please his audience," replied Donald.

"But that's not answering my question," retorted Beatrice; "I want you to speak your own mind."

"I think what he said was mostly true," answered Donald. "It was not very new to us Australians, but it was well expressed and forcibly delivered. I hear that he has had a large experience of agriculture in England; but it's a subject upon which I do not pose as an authority, as does Sir George."

"Don't you like him?" asked Beatrice.

"I scarcely know him well enough to know," replied Donald. "Do you like him?"

"Now that's not a fair question, Mr Dorset," said Beatrice, laughing. "I'm not sure that my case is not similar to yours: I scarcely know him well enough. You know, to know people you want to meet them somewhere else than at balls, and parties, and functions. I don't know him half as well as I know you. You see, I've so often met you at home."

There was something in the tone of voice which caused Donald's heart to beat more rapidly, but he looked straight in front of his horse, and said: "It's more than that that has made you know me better. We have been together in the fellowship of suffering. Do you know what that means, Miss Ballantyne?"

"No," answered Beatrice impetuously. "I don't know, Mr Dorset, and I don't want to know. I want to forget, and that's the reason I am leaving Australia for good. Why should my life be haunted by ghosts not of my own raising, and by the memory of crimes with which, personally, I have had nothing to do? Don't you think," she continued bitterly, "that it's a cruel shame that I should have been involved in all this complication of Australian criminology? You have made me serious, so you must take the consequences. I hate Australia, and I was almost going

to say that I hate Australians too. You none of you can know what I have suffered."

"We have all suffered," said Donald gently.

"Yes, I know that, but you're an Australian, and the wickedness of this thing belongs to your country. I'm an Englishwoman, and have been brought into this thing by accident, and yet it's become a perfect nightmare and horror to me, from which I am longing for release."

"Do you believe in God?" asked Donald quietly.

"Certainly I do," replied Beatrice.

"Forgive me for what I am going to say," said Donald, "but I've often wished to have an opportunity to talk with you alone. I've heard before, from Betty, how you hate Australia, and Storm-Cliff, and the Caves of Shend. I hate them too, in a sense, for your sake as well as my own; but I believe that our lives are portioned out to us by God, and that out of the storm and stress of life and its evil things, as well as its sunshine, God wishes us to make something for ourselves, which we call character. Betty tells me that you say that your future husband shall never know about your Australian sorrows; but I think that you are wrong. To marry and have a secret would be like having a skeleton in the cupboard, upon which the door might any day open. I don't think that wife and husband should have any important secrets between them. The truest love is based on intimate knowledge; love only reaches so far as it knows, and partial knowledge must limit love. The happiest marriages are those which have no secrets; at any rate, only secrets which are shared.

"Do you think then that I ought to tell my future husband all about my connection with 'The Towers' and the Caves of Shend?"

"No," replied Donald. "That would be unpleasant and humiliating for you—he might not understand you properly, and think your self-revelation unnecessary; but a fellowship of suffering is one

of the strongest bonds of love. I think you should marry someone who already knows."

Before another word could be spoken a wild cry was heard from the narrow, hilly road in front of them, and the riders, who had been walking, and occasionally trotting their horses ahead, turned with cries of alarm, and urged their horses to a gallop, back to where in a cutting, on the side of a hill, they had just ridden past a wool-team drawn by a dozen oxen. Down the hill came a riderless runaway wagon and pair of horses, at a mad gallop, making straight for the riding party.

"God help us!" ejaculated Donald.

The whole party of over thirty riders, with their horses, were at once bunched in a mob, for hearing the terrific noise of the approaching wagon and horses, the bullocks had swung round, blocking the road behind them. Some of the party had dismounted and left their horses; others had pulled close into the side of the road, hoping thus to escape collision, but the bulk of them were bunched in a struggling mass in the very centre of the roadway.

There seemed to be no escape for them, and in some cases the terror of the moment paralysed both riders and horses. They stood there like statues waiting for death.

Betty, Beatrice, and Donald had been forced by the impact of the returning riders close against the fence on the side of the road—the side upon which the maddened team was approaching.

"If they could only be made to fall," muttered Donald in anguish.

He looked around at the girls, who were as white as death and paralysed with fear.

Another two or three minutes, he thought, and they would be crushed and mangled, most likely dead.

"Slip off your horses and get over the fence," he said to them; but neither moved. They seemed spellbound by the awful death which threatened them.

How he did it he never knew, but Donald, by some means, lifted both girls from their saddles and put them over the fence on to the grass, and then gripping hard the reins of "Crusoe," he dug his spurs into "Tomboy," and, snorting and leaping, they together forced their way out of the struggling, excited mob of men and horses on to the road.

The fearful group of riders watched them as he galloped the two horses up the rise. It was evident that by keeping well on the near side of the road he might himself escape.

Donald knew that; but what of the crowd in front of the bullock and wool dray? At least half a dozen of them would be killed or injured!

In a moment Donald had made up his mind, at whatever risk to himself, to stop them. Gripping the reins of both horses, he dug in the spurs again, and drove them full gallop at the runaways. The impact was tremendous, and Donald was thrown fully forty feet along the road. Both horses were killed, and Donald, badly bruised, and with a broken arm, lay unconscious upon the hard gravel; but the runaways were thrown and stunned, and a terrible catastrophe avoided.

The crowd, loud in their praises of Donald's heroism, soon gathered around the unconscious man; but it was Beatrice and Betty that rendered first aid and wiped the blood and sweat and dust from off his hands and face.

It was hours before he awoke to consciousness and found himself in a private hospital, where his nurses were Betty and Beatrice. Donald had saved their lives, and in doing so Beatrice had learned what he meant when he had declared to her that a fellowship of suffering was one of the strongest bonds of love.

The following morning all Australia was ringing with Donald's fame. There were over thirty people in the riding party, and every one of them regarded Donald as their saviour; but Beatrice whispered in her

heart, " My Australian, my hero, my Donald, I love you ! "

On the day after the opening of the Bore, Lady Stirling knew, without being told, that she and Sir Godfrey and Sir George Cameron would return to England without Beatrice.

It had been decided that she would wait until Donald was convalescent, then Lady Dorset, Betty, Beatrice and Donald would sail for England together. They were to be married quietly in a dear little English church, known to Beatrice, in the cleanest, quietest, and most beautiful little village of Derbyshire, and afterward make a long honeymoon tour in the lovely lands washed by the Mediterranean.

They were to make their settled home amid the scenes of Beatrice's early days in England; and, as the memories of youth are eclectic, time might weave rainbow haloes around some of their Australian memories, reminding them that in the land of their one-time sad pilgrimages there had been sunshine as well as rain.

CHAPTEN XLII

THE OLD MADE NEW

It was one of those exquisite summer days peculiar to the coastline of the Pacific Ocean.

That vastest and most romantic of great waters spread away from the weather-beaten rocks at Storm-Cliff like a rich, immeasurable pavement of tinted glass: grey and silver along the shore-line, pale green and gold farther out, and a deep amethystine blue where the deep sea stretched far away to the distant horizon.

Just here, however, the deep blue sea-line approached very near to the shore, so much so that occasionally homeward-bound steamers, on such days as this, gave their passengers an opportunity of waving last farewells to their friends.

Here on the rocks below where once stood "Storm-Cliff Towers," Grace and the doctor waited to waft a good-bye to Beatrice, and looking seaward, with the fresh salt air in their lungs and sunshine all around, it was as though they had put the whole sad past behind them, and thought only of the future prefigured in that radiant summer sea. The doctor, absorbed in thought, leaned back heavily upon his walking-stick, and his sister noted how he seemed to have aged.

She would be glad now, for her brother's sake, when Beatrice was gone.

Very soon, around the northern headland, the well-

timed steamer swept proudly into view. Grace exclaimed something, but her brother, too busy with his thoughts to make reply, stood watching the ocean liner as she drew rapidly nearer.

Beatrice was on that steamer, and had promised Grace to get someone to point out Storm-Cliff to her as they passed, and she would wave good-bye to her and to the doctor if he could manage to come down.

She knew very well that he would come, but somehow had feared to ask him.

True to her promise, Storm-Cliff had been pointed out to Beatrice, who, as they drew nearer, with a powerful field-glass swept the shore. Looking for the last time at the site of her one-time inheritance, she saw it as she had never seen it before. She was leaving it behind for ever; an impassable sea was between her and the place of so much anxiety and sorrow, and from her new point of vision everything seemed wondrously changed. She was still young, and, steeped in the glory of the midday sun, with the placid sea around, romance wove a veil over the evil things she might have seen in that landscape. The two figures upon the distant rocks were her true friends; she felt this more than she had ever done, and waved to them a passionate farewell.

Donald said he could see them waving back. But much as Beatrice loved Donald, she somehow, just then, resented speech, for her heart was very full, and she whispered, "Don't talk, Donald dear, or I shall break down altogether."

She waved her handkerchief again, for it was to be good-bye to Australia for ever. And Dr Strong and Grace, as they waved back, knew that for Beatrice it was best that it should be so. "Why," thought the doctor, "should we keep alive our failures, and allow the breath of the dead wintry past to blight the joys of summer days? Why indeed! Why should one sad episode run as a sombre thread through the whole fabric of this fair woman's life?

It might not be removed perhaps; but it could be transfigured and glorified! Simple happiness is, after all, not the chief end of life; but nobleness and goodness."

But, with the passing of the doctor's thoughts, the great ocean liner was rounding a distant headland, soon to be out of sight, leaving behind a wake of burnished silver, the gleam of which suggested to Grace a brighter path for her friend into the future. All the brighter, she thought, that she had been tried and purified in the fires of suffering, made more perfect through all this pain and trouble. As she whispered this to herself the tears came to her eyes; but to her brother she simply said: "I am glad the day has been so fine."

The doctor's thoughts, however, were not of the beauty of the day, but of Beatrice, and the possibilities of her future.

"Come," he said to Grace, "the steamer's rounding the headland."

For one more minute they stood watching her disappearance.

"There!" said the doctor, with a sigh. "Our friend has gone, and, thank God, she's left the past behind her, buried out of sight, and, if possible, forgotten. It's best so; the sad winter is followed by laughing spring, and spring by jovial summer—*they don't remember!* Let the dead past bury its dead; ours is to forget the things which are behind and act in the living present."

But as Grace listened to her brother, her eyes were tear-dimmed, for she knew how deeply he was moved. They were walking now over the familiar path to Storm Cliff village, and above them, on the hill-side, was the church.

"Do you remember," the doctor continued, evidently talking to himself as well as Grace, "what the preacher said last Sunday night? It was about the old Hebrew prophet, who—as he surveyed the spoilt

vessel of clay, broken on the potter's wheel—said, 'He will make it again,' meaning that he would make out of the marred clay something that should be unblemished by the mistakes and failures of former efforts.

"I suppose to most people," he went on, speaking more tenderly, as though he wished to comfort Grace rather than himself, "the early efforts and experiences of life are mostly marred and broken things; but, no matter what—there *is* One Who can gather up the fragments of the fateful past and make out of them new things of joy and beauty. I believe it will be so with Beatrice; she is young and good, and that love which ennobles and glorifies all it touches has entered into her life, and far away from tainted Storm Cliff and the Caves of Shend . . . 'He will make it again.'"

THE END

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